

Reflection for the 29th Sunday of Ordinary time, Cycle A

The lectionary translation of the readings for this Sunday can be found at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/102223.cfm>

1st Reading: *Isaiah 45:1, 4-6*

Cyrus the Great, King of Persia defeated the Babylonians during the exile of the Jews and released them, decreed that their temple be rebuilt and required the lands around them to help, monetarily. In this selection, we hear that it is God who chose him for this task. The word we translate as “anointed” in this selection is “Messiah” in Hebrew or “Christ” in Greek.

2nd Reading: *1 Thessalonians 1:1–5b*

We begin reading from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, a church he founded. He is on his 2nd missionary journey and Timothy has just returned to him after visiting the Church in Thessalonica. You’ll hear what is the first mention in Scripture of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity as Paul commends the community. He is not talking simply about concepts of faith, hope, and love but the real achievements of their faith, their active love, and the hope that helps them patiently endure suffering while awaiting the final salvation of God.

Gospel: *Matthew 22:15–21*

“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Mt 22:21

What did you hear? Did you hear that Jesus is smarter than the Pharisees and Herodians? Yes, but it’s not about that.

Did you hear that the Pharisees felt that Jesus told the truth, taught God’s ways, and didn’t care about human opinion? Yes, but it’s not about that either. By the way, they weren’t really being nice to Jesus. They were trying to set him up in their effort to entrap him.

Did you hear that we have to pay our civil taxes? Yes, but it’s not about that either.

Did you hear that we have to give God his due? Yes, and that is what this reading is about. It’s the whole purpose of this story.

So what is God’s due? For Caesar who made the coinage used to pay the tax, the coins were his anyway, he made them. What did God make... That’s right, he made everything. Everything is his, not ours. We were just told to exercise dominion over all of his creation (Gen 1:26,28). But remember, that was the pre-original sin concept of dominion. It doesn’t give us the right to do what we are doing to his creation.

This situation of God owning everything and us exercising dominion is like the story of the vineyard leased to tenants which we had two weeks ago (Mt 21:33-43). It’s like the tenant farming arrangement that was used in the Black Belt of the American South. Tenants would grow the cotton crop and then turn it over to the landowner who would sell it and use part of the proceeds to pay the tenant’s tab, at the local market, which had been accumulated during the growing season.

But God's arrangement with the Jewish people was that he only got 10%. Look at how grain was handled. The first ten percent of the grain production was to be given to God and it was placed in the temple granaries. The priests and the temple workers lived off that, of course, but the majority of it was being held for use during times of need, times of plight or draught or to be used to support the needy. Like any civil tax; you give it to God, the tax authority, and it is used to support your society.

But Jesus bumped it up a couple of notches, didn't he? That's what "Do this in remembrance of me" is all about. He is not telling us to lift the bread and say a few words; he is telling us to make an offering of our very selves, like he was doing. Jesus is asking us to give our all, not just 10%.

Many people don't want to do that. We don't want to give ourselves because we want to be in charge of our own lives. But that is exactly what God wants. He wants us to be in charge of our own lives while we are living our lives for him. To do all the little things we do, and the big things, consciously aware that we are doing them for God, that the fruitfulness of the entirety of our life is God's due. That's what dominion is all about. He wants us to exercise dominion over our lives and over all of his creation, but for him, not for ourselves. The beauty of it all is that, when we live for him, our lives are phenomenal, not the draining rut that many people are caught up in today.

And Jesus gave us the mechanism for doing it. Remember, in John's Gospel, the foot washing is the Mass. There is no bread and wine. The foot washing doesn't take the place of the bread and the wine, though, it is the bread and the wine. It is us combining the offering of our lives to Jesus' offering of his own life to the father and giving it to God as one gift, just as the documents of Vat II say, "The faithful offer the divine victim to the father and they should learn to offer themselves with it." (This is stated in three of the Vatican II documents, SC, PO & LG.

So today, when the presider places the bread and wine on the corporal, imagine yourself being placed on the altar with it. When you approach the altar for Communion, remember that your "yes" is an agreement to live as a member of the Body of Christ. And when we are dismissed, remember that you are being sent into the mission field to do all that you do, for the one who made you. Then remind yourself of that each day during the week.

Reflection:

"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Mt 22:21

Question:

What words or phrases grabbed your attention during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they grabbed your attention?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

Alternative:

Share about/Reflect upon one aspect of your life, your finances, your marriage or other relationships, your parenting, your academic studies, etc. In what way are you doing those things for the Lord? How is he benefiting from your fruitfulness? What can you change, in your life, to be more conscious of the fact that we "live for the Lord", as Paul says?

Verse by Verse:

Mt 22:16 “They (the Pharisees) sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians...” | The Pharisees and the Herodians represent two of the Jewish groups during Jesus’ time. They were at opposite extremes on the question they were about to ask Jesus. That was the trap. If Jesus said, “Pay the tax”, the Pharisees and their followers, who loathed paying tribute to Ceasar, would be upset. If he said, “Don’t pay the tax”, the Herodians, who supported the descendants of Herod the Great, and the civil government, would be upset. It seemed like a no-win situation. (UBSH) Also, as Luke points out (Lk 20:20), Jesus would have been subject to arrest if he spoke against paying the tax. (JBC)

Mt 22:20 “...Whose image is this, and whose inscription?” | The coin used to pay the taxes had the image of the Roman emperor. In this case, it would have been Tiberius, By “inscription”, Jesus was asking whose name was inscribed on it. But, Tiberius’ coins would have also had the inscription, “son of god and high priest” (UBSH)(SP). Jesus would not have been specifically referring to this part of the inscription (UBSH). This inscription, though, would have made it particularly difficult for Jewish people because of the 2nd Commandment against graven images (Ex 20:4-5). Take particular note of the prohibition against serving other gods.

Mt 22:21 “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” | The word translated “repay” here is different from the word “pay” used by the Pharisees in Mt 22:17. It means to give what is due. (AYBC) Jesus does not answer the question here but points to Ceasar’s obvious civil power. (JBC) UBSH and JBC point out that this answer is somewhat open-ended in that the individual still has to decide for themselves what belongs to Cesar and what belongs to God.