

29th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

October 19, 2008 – Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

For the last several months, I've heard a lot of people talking about today's Gospel. I've heard it more and more the last few weeks, and even more the last few days.

Most of them probably didn't realize that they were talking about today's Gospel. But I think they were. They were talking about temporal power – power on earth, power in this life – who ought to wield it, and what they ought to do with it.

A national election is just a few days away. People are talking a lot about what our society ought to be like, what government ought to do. And about what *we* ought to do. That's the crux of the Gospel today.

I can't help you with the political part of it. The IRS would probably swoop down on me if I did, and you probably wouldn't like what I had to say anyway. But I think this is a good day to think about power and how it can serve God's purposes.

The power of the Lord is absolute. He can do anything He wants to do. Temporal power – earthly power – is limited. There are certain things humans can't do, no matter how much power they have.

God can only use his power for good. Human power can be used for good or evil.

Sometimes people act as servants of God's purpose, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they consciously try to

serve God's purpose. Sometimes they succeed. Sometimes they don't.

Sometimes they think they're serving God's purpose, but they're not. Sometimes they claim they are, but they know better. Sometimes they even serve God's purposes without knowing it or intending it.

MOVE

That's where King Cyrus comes in. In our first reading today, Cyrus is described as the Lord's anointed. This is the only place in Scripture where that expression is used to describe a foreigner. "His anointed" – the Lord's anointed. Everywhere else, it's used to refer to Israel's kings and prophets and priests. But here, the prophet tells us that the Lord grasps the right hand of Cyrus, the Persian King, and makes him the legitimate king over Israel.

Think of it. It's kind of startling, really. Cyrus was a foreigner, a follower of the Persian god Bel-Marduk, not Yahweh. Yet the Lord uses Cyrus to accomplish His purposes. God directed his steps, even though Cyrus did not know God. This is another one of those times in salvation history when God intervenes to save His people from almost certain annihilation. Cyrus doesn't know it, but God chooses him to release the Israelites from the grip of the Babylonian empire.

Now, Cyrus can subdue nations before him, make kings run in his service, open doors before him, leaving the gates unbarred – but all those things are the work of God, not Cyrus. The power of Cyrus is really the power of God, so that people everywhere may know that there is no god but Yahweh. It's the power of God, working through Cyrus.

One thing about the Israelites – for them, the power of God in their daily lives was a concrete reality. They had a clear vision of the really dramatic political history of their nation. For them, everything was about their relationship with their God. There was no distinction between the temporal world and the political world. If they were spiritually negligent, they'd pay the political price.

MOVE

The Gospel is more subtle about the distinction between temporal power and God's purposes. We hear a lot about the Pharisees – I've often thought that as a group, they get a bad rap. They really were trying very hard to be observant Jews. But many of them seemed to be suspicious of Jesus, to say the least.

The Herodians were a different story. They were staunch supporters of King Herod. Although they were Jews too, they were actively cooperating with the Roman Empire. They thought that unwavering loyalty to Rome was in their own best interests. Pay the census tax? Sure, absolutely. No problem. No question about it.

The Zealots were just the opposite – active opposition to Roman rule. Pay the census tax? No way. Don't cooperate with the oppressors in any way.

Although the Pharisees and the Herodians were pretty much on opposite sides politically, here they unite trying to trap Jesus into taking sides. These days, that might be kind of like asking Him how he's going to vote in the election next month. No matter how He answers, He's going to make

someone really angry. Either way, He can expect a visit from either Herod's police or the Zealot enforcers.

So his distinction between civic duty and religious duty seems ambiguous. Each of the opposing factions have to decide for themselves what is merely a temporal matter and what is an absolute moral duty to God.

Sometimes that decision is not as easy as it looks.

For us as Christians, the relationship with God is more personal and spiritual. That makes the political piece even more troubling – at least for me. I've often said that for me, the coming of the kingdom would mean that government itself would become irrelevant. But I'm not holding my breath on that one.

MOVE

The Catechism of the Catholic Church devotes a good bit of space to a discussion of the human community and social organization. The Catechism says that human society needs some form of authority to function. Legitimately constituted authority should be respected insofar as it serves the true good of all the people. If it serves the dignity and development of the human person, it's doing what it's supposed to do and can claim legitimacy.

But if it perpetrates abuse or injustice or oppression or evil, if it's contrary to natural law and the fundamental rights of persons, then it forfeits its claim to legitimacy and must be opposed -- it's an intrusion by Caesar on God's created truth. There is no authority except that which comes from God. Every day, we pray that our leaders will recognize that.

A lot of people get cynical about politics. Sometimes I think Bernard Shaw was right when he said, “The power of accurate observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it.” Sometimes it seems like God has withdrawn from the world and left it to carry on by itself, under the leadership of whoever can shout the loudest or muster the biggest mob in the street.

Some people even tell me they’re “not interested in politics.” To each his own, I suppose, but that suggests that we all should just be passive subjects to a foreign Caesar.

Others say, “I am interested in politics so that some day I will not have to be interested in politics.” That means developing an informed vision of a morally just society and working toward that vision. That means more than just voting every couple of years.

MOVE

The Gospel seems to leave the question unanswered. What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? It almost sounds like Jesus is dividing the world between the things of God and the things that are not of God. Does that mean we’re supposed to compartmentalize our lives into God and Caesar, moral issues and legal issues, civil and spiritual?

I don’t think so. So, what belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? If there’s an answer to that question, I think it must be “it *ALL* belongs to God.”

Of course, it’s a personal decision how that all plays out – next month, and for the rest of time. But in another place in Scripture, it says that “man cannot serve two masters.”

READINGS

Reading 1

Is 45:1, 4-6

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus,
whose right hand I grasp,
subduing nations before him,
and making kings run in his service,
opening doors before him
and leaving the gates unbarred:
For the sake of Jacob, my servant,
of Israel, my chosen one,
I have called you by your name,
giving you a title, though you knew me not.
I am the LORD and there is no other,
there is no God besides me.
It is I who arm you, though you know me not,
so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun
people may know that there is none besides me.
I am the LORD, there is no other.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

R. (7b) Give the Lord glory and honor.

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

For great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
awesome is he, beyond all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are things of nought,
but the LORD made the heavens.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Give to the LORD, you families of nations,
give to the LORD glory and praise;
give to the LORD the glory due his name!
Bring gifts, and enter his courts.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Worship the LORD, in holy attire;
tremble before him, all the earth;
say among the nations: The LORD is king,
he governs the peoples with equity. **R. Give the Lord glory and honor.**

Reading II

1 Thes 1:1-5b

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you,
remembering you in our prayers,
unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love
and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,
before our God and Father,
knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God,
how you were chosen.

For our gospel did not come to you in word alone,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.

Gospel

Mt 22:15-21

The Pharisees went off
and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.
They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying,
"Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man
and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.
And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion,
for you do not regard a person's status.
Tell us, then, what is your opinion:
Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"
Knowing their malice, Jesus said,
"Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?
Show me the coin that pays the census tax."
Then they handed him the Roman coin.
He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?"
They replied, "Caesar's."
At that he said to them,
"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar
and to God what belongs to God."