

## **Twenty Ninth Sunday of the Year October 22, 2017 Mission Sunday**

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 Matthew 22:15-21

Gratitude is the virtue of being thankful to someone for benefits personally received. It creates a spirit of goodness in the giver and the receiver through a state of thankfulness. It is a human response generated by the divine grace for the favours generously given and received. The word gratitude comes from the Latin word “gratus” meaning “grace” and grace is the presence of God manifested in people through virtues. To be grateful is to be essentially graceful or grace-filled and that is why the prayers we say before meals we call it grace. The Bible guides us to a spirit of Gratitude for all that the Lord does to us and for all the gifts he places into our lives. All we receive in life is grace and all in life is a gift from God. We ought to respond to these gifts and not take them for granted. The Readings of today tell us about the relationship between the absolute divine control and the earthly, temporal power that can serve God’s purposes. In the first reading Prophet Isaiah sees the hand of God in the events of history. The Persian king Cyrus is to be the unknowing servant of Yahweh’s purpose in releasing the chosen Israelites from the grip of the Babylonian Kingdom and is the person Israel needed for their support. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul joyfully thanks God for all the gifts the people have received. He recognizes that the Gospel they have received is not due only to the human preaching of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, but also ‘in power and in the Holy Spirit’. He is conscious of the effect of God’s power through human instruments. Today’s Gospel draws a subtler distinction between temporal power and God’s sovereignty. Jesus sees through the political trap of the Pharisees and the Herodians and draws a deliberately ambiguous distinction between the civic duty to Caesar and the essential religious duty to God. He teaches them to show loyalty to earthly rulers so long as they receive benefits from him. But their essential and primary duty is to God.

Prophet Isaiah who lived in Babylonia with the exiled Jews tells them in God’s name that their God is the God not only of the Jews but of history and of the whole world. Cyrus, who had become the king of Medes and Persians, later extended his rule over Syria, Babylon and Egypt. He was a benevolent king and according to Isaiah, the achievements of Cyrus were all due to the power of the Lord God of Israel. Cyrus the great acted in accordance with his usual enlightened practice of not imposing Persian culture even on captured peoples like other

monarchs. He released the Jews from captivity, sent them home and subsidized their rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus was indeed God's chosen instrument from the beginning of his rule. The oracle goes even so far as to call Cyrus the anointed of the Lord since all he accomplished for Israel was in accordance with God's saving plan for his chosen people. The prophet indicates that it is Lord God who took the monarch by the right hand and guided his actions. He further says this that God acted for the sake of the tribes of Jacob. Once they were rebellious and full of pride but now they have become wiser through the experience of their exile. They are now prepared to offer their humble service to God. By their example the nations from the East to the West will give honour to the one true God. He calls on his people to give willing service for "God loves the cheerful giver." God often works through the persons of his choice who may not even know his name.

In the Second Reading of today Paul tells the Thessalonian Church about the greatness of God. The reading begins by identifying the writer Paul, along with Silas who was one of the leaders of the Jerusalem community and Timothy who was also a companion to Peter. Addressing the church as a whole, Paul is confirming the Divinity of Christ fully visible in the unity of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Having prayed that the grace and peace would be with the Thessalonians, Paul proceeds to give thanks to God in prayer for all the blessings that the Thessalonians had already received. He mentions their work of faith, their labour of love and their steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ. The labour of love is a reflection of active charity. As such, the prayer of thanksgiving to God embraces the virtues of faith, hope and charity that had been bestowed upon the Thessalonians. Continuing with his Letter he emphasizes the fact that it was not just his words that transformed the Thessalonians, but the "power" of the Holy Spirit. He tells them that they are God's friends; God's chosen people, which are proved by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on them. Giving credit where it rightfully belongs, Paul made it clear that it was the Holy Spirit who was responsible for all the spiritual manifestations of righteousness and in creating the family of Christians in Thessalonica. He tells them that the basics of community life are faith, love and hope. Though these virtues require work, labour and endurance, the people receive them only because of God's initiative.

In the Gospel reading of today, we have the first of four challenges to Jesus coming from the leaders among the Jews as they aim to oppose him in his

teachings and social relationships. Their plan was to get Jesus to discredit himself through his response. Everyone respected Jesus as a great teacher and talented preacher. The first challenge given in today's Gospel comes from the Pharisees as they make use of the Herodians to trap Jesus in his teachings. The Pharisees opposed Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry because he freely associated with sinners and tax collectors. The Pharisees were in fact were in opposition to Sadducees and Herodians, two other Jewish sects. Nevertheless they were willing to join hands with them in their desire to challenge Jesus. Their deviousness is seen in the delegation they sent, namely, a mixture of their disciples and some Herodians. It was a known fact that the Pharisees and the Herodians were bitterly opposed to each other. The Pharisees were rabid nationalists and totally anti-Roman and the Herodians were willing to collaborate with the Romans hoping to benefit from this relationship. In the language of today, they would be called "appeasers" or "fellow travellers". It was a perfect example of the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Both sides hated each other but they hated Jesus even more. Perhaps they thought Jesus would not go into conflict or taken aback after seeing this combined opposition. Their opening statement is clever and very flattering. They praise the utter honesty and integrity of Jesus, which was a fact. Jesus, in fact, is being praised as endowed with God's own sense of truth and justice, totally impartial, with perhaps a bias for the poor, the weak and powerless.

In their praise and flattery the Pharisees feign to show great respect and confidence in Jesus as an objective and truthful leader. In fact they want to get him into a non-win situation so that no matter how he responds to their question he will lose. They place before him the delicate problem of the payment of taxes to Caesar, whether it is lawful or not. The Poll Tax was required of everyone between the ages of fourteen and sixty five to be paid to Caesar. It amounted to a denarius which was equivalent to a day's wage of a common labourer. During the time of Jesus taxation was not a popular issue. Theirs was an occupied territory which meant they were paying taxes and giving tribute to a foreign power. They had in mind the theocracy, God as their King and hence to pay tax to earthly ruler was an insult to God and their religion. Taxes, or any form of submission, should only be made to God, by the offerings made and taxes paid to the Temple. The Jews as a rule hated the Romans hated their brutality, their moral corruption, above all their godlessness. So, the nationalistic Pharisees strongly felt that the taxes should not be paid to the oppressor. On the contrary, for the Herodians,

collaboration with the Romans was seen as beneficial. They looked for personal benefit by their association with Rome.

The Pharisees looked for an answer from Jesus on the issue of tax. They thought that if Jesus responds saying that the tax is lawful and should be paid would certainly upset the Jews. But if he responded saying it is not lawful and should not be paid, then he will be advocating breaking the law and would upset the Romans. Whatever be his answer, they were certain of their victory. Jesus, of course, was perfectly aware of the dangers in giving a straight answer. He accused them of gross hypocrisy in setting this trap. They had no desire to know the answer because they had their own answers already. Their only intention was to lay a trap for Jesus and to catch with some verbal error. Cleverly and deliberately Jesus begins to turn the tables. Jesus asks them to show him a coin. An observant Jew was not supposed to carry with him a Roman coin with Caesar's inscription on it. But here the Pharisees did not have any problem in producing one at the request of Jesus. He asks them to explain whose image the coin had and what the inscription on it was. The head was that of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor of the day. The inscription would have read, "Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus, great high priest". Caesar claimed not only political sovereignty but also divine attributes. Worship of the emperor was seen as a test of loyalty to the not very religious central government and would soon become a major issue for the early Christians as it was already for the Jews. For both groups, worship given to the Roman emperor could be nothing but idolatry.

Jesus clearly makes them understand that the Roman coinage technically belonged to the emperor or the Government. Jesus then gave them his famous answer, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." It was an invitation to work out for them the proper interplay of political and religious loyalty. In one simple phrase he was saved from both pious accusation and political self-incrimination. What Jesus says must be taken in its literal sense. When he told his opponents that they ought to repay Caesar what belongs to Caesar, he was merely stating that they should give back to Caesar what actually belongs to him. But he pushes the controversy further by adding that they should also give to God what belongs to God. Every Jew was aware of the Scriptures to know that all things came from God. Some did interpret this in the context of the separation between the Church and the State. In that case Jesus would be saying that it is lawful to pay taxes. That is not what Jesus exactly

says. For a Jew, including Jesus everything belongs to God by the very nature of creation. From that perspective nothing really belongs to Caesar because, Caesar is not God. But if they are using the facility provided by him, they have the duty to respond to it. They in fact used the coins minted by him and needed it for transaction. The right to mint a coin proved sovereignty. The Roman Government minted their own coins and in this way they zealously guarded their sovereignty. Jesus cleverly proclaims the supremacy of God and places the problem back with his opponents.

The answer that Jesus gave to his opponents left them to ponder as it does even today. The individual has to discern and see what is that which belongs to God and what is under the control of the state. The state has many obligations: public services, water supply, schooling, social welfare for the poor and the aged and the civil protection. Religion's duties are to connect people with God, the ultimate answer to our questions and the basis of our life's decisions. But the dichotomy between the secular and the religious is not absolute. The motivation for public services, schooling, social welfare and care for the aged is often religious. So the boundaries between the two can sometimes be difficult to set and allow many vexing questions to remain. The relationship between the two can remain strained given the fanaticism a secularism that has set in. The question is whether there should be a total division between the two or should they act together so as to build the Kingdom of God. This remains the basis of sane thinking on the matter of loyalty to one's own country and civil obedience.

We all are, in some way, the citizens of two kingdoms: citizens of the political territory where we belong and citizens in God's Kingdom. As Jesus says, they both require certain loyalties from us. In the context of the Gospel we need to realize that when we really love our country and its people, then we may have to stand in strong opposition to the authorities on certain issues. Of course, the authorities will try to present such people as traitors and a threat to the stability of the country. The Passage makes it very clear that we have two responsibilities: to the government of our country or territory and to God our creator. Where both are in harmony there cannot be any conflict. Wherever there is immoral or unjust behaviour against people's dignity and rights, then there has to be conflict. Such conflict is not always bad. On the contrary, it is because of creative conflict that our society makes progress. Provided we always act in a positive and creative way, "speaking the truth in love", then the flawed kingdoms that men build can,

in time, become the Kingdom of God. As a famous dissident -- and martyr, St Thomas More, said: "The King's good servant, but God's first."

A group of alumni, highly established in their careers, got together to visit their old university professor. Conversation soon turned into complaints about stress in work and life. Offering his guests coffee, the professor went to the kitchen and returned with a large pot of coffee and an assortment of cups – porcelain, plastic, glass, crystal, some plain looking, some expensive, some exquisite – telling them to help themselves to the coffee. When all the students had a cup of coffee in hand, the professor said: “If you noticed, all the nice looking expensive cups were taken up, leaving behind the plain and cheap ones. While it is normal for you to want only the best for yourselves, that is the source of your problems and stress. Be assured that the cup itself adds no quality to the coffee. In most cases it is just more expensive and in some cases even hides what we drink. What all of you really wanted was coffee, not the cup, but you consciously went for the best cups... And then you began eyeing each other’s cups. Now consider this: Life is the coffee; the jobs, money and position in society are the cups. The cups are just tools to hold and contain Life, and the type of cup we have does not define, nor change the quality of Life we live. Sometimes, by concentrating only on the cup, we fail to enjoy the coffee God has provided us.” God brews the coffee, not the cups. Enjoy your coffee! “The happiest people don’t have the best of everything. They just make the best of everything.” Live simply. Love generously. Care deeply. Speak kindly and bloom where you are planted! Leave the rest to God.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India