

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Pharisees sent their disciples to Jesus, with a few of Herod's followers mixed in, to ask: "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. So, tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said: "Why are you playing these games? Why are you trying to trap me?"

Matthew 22, 15-21



The readings for this twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time are fascinating for the manner in which they focus on matters that imply that our belief in God and our claiming that we are disciples of Jesus inevitably involve us in playing a responsible role in the civil societies to which we belong. We simply cannot live with integrity as believers in God and members of the Christian community without affirming the dignity of all people and contributing to the common good.

While today's gospel-reading describes an incident in which Jesus demonstrated that he was not going to be bested in matters political by hypocrites who had set out to trap him with a tricky question that, on the surface, looked as though it related to a real-life dilemma, it does raise the issue of how living in organised societies calls us to make decisions based on sound moral principles. In his third apostolic exhortation, entitled *Gaudete et Exultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), Pope Francis states that all Christians living in a democracy have a serious duty to participate in public life and to contribute to the common good. He writes:

"Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace...You cannot grow in holiness without committing yourself, body and soul, to giving your best to this endeavour."

Gaudete et Exultate, 2019, page 6, #25

Complementing the writing of Pope Francis, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released in February 2020 a revised edition of their letter to American Catholics, entitled *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility*. Among other things, this letter highlights the role which the Gospel and our Church have in the life-long formation of conscience and the moral responsibilities that are a consequence of sound conscience. Proper formation of conscience is founded on the basic principles of Catholic social doctrine: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity.

How, then, do the readings of this twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time connect to the exhortation of Pope Francis and the letter of the US Catholic Bishops?

In commenting on the active participation of God in the history of humanity and the Chosen People, Isaiah, in today's first reading, highlights how God worked through the most unlikely of collaborators in the person of the Persian emperor, Cyrus. Isaiah presents God anointing Cyrus as a messiah: "I'll go ahead of you, clearing and paving the road. I'll break down bronze

city gates, smash padlocks, kick down barred entrances. I'll lead you to buried treasures, secret caches of valuables. - confirmation that it is, in fact, I, God, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. It's because of my dear servant, Jacob, Israel my chosen, that I've singled you out, called you by name, and given you this privileged work. And you don't even know me! (Isaiah 45, 1-7). This would have deeply shocked Isaiah's audience, but it demonstrates how God can release good in the world through the most unlikely and unexpected people and events. In reality, Cyrus was a leader who respected the religion and culture of other nations. He demonstrated that by allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple. He even contributed financially to that project. Isaiah was able to accept Cyrus as a credible instrument and messenger of God, not because of his race or religion, but because of the good he did for God's people. We can become so insular in our thinking that we can behave as though good emanates only from people whose beliefs and practices are much the same as ours. We can, as a consequence, be suspicious of developments in doctrine and theology and insist on finding comfort in the tried and true, in the false certainty that there is only one way of expressing the truth. That explains why, fifty years after Vatican II, there are still some Catholics who resist its insights and its call to open their lives to God's renewing Spirit.

On the surface, today's gospel-reading is an account of how Jewish religious leaders joined forces with a local political group to trick Jesus into upsetting either the Roman occupiers or the local religious authorities. While Jesus was quick to see their scheming, his enigmatic response - "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what is God's." - has sometimes been misinterpreted to suggest that there should be a separation between church and state. However, it's vital that we do not lose sight of the fact that everything belongs to God. God is the source of all that exists. There is no part of life and civilisation that lies outside of God's concern. As Christians, as disciples of Jesus, we have a responsibility to scrutinise and critique the decisions made by the governments we elect and the agencies those governments appoint to administer the revenue accumulated from taxation. Things like health care, education and commerce are regulated by institutions established by elected government but those institutions have a responsibility to care for the needs of all and to ensure that the common good is served. As a consequence of our allegiance to Jesus and his Gospel, we have a shared responsibility to serve the cause of social justice, to protect the most vulnerable among us, to promote the common good. While government institutions and agencies set the rules and regulations for providing financial support to people in need, it is important that we keep in mind that compassion has no price-tag, justice is not measured out in small doses, that tolerance, forgiveness and mercy cannot have commercial value attributed to them. That's why a Pope can remind us that, as Christians, we have a serious duty to participate in public life, and a group of American bishops can call us to have consciences that are attuned to how we vote and how we embrace our political responsibilities.