

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time 145-A 108 SMF Ps 96:1+3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10  
Isaiah 45: 1,4-6, 1 Thess 1:1-5 Matt 22:15-21

Response: To you O Lord, glory and power.

This was a huge issue: paying taxes to Caesar. The ploy to get Jesus to say something that would undermine him is an old trick in the public arena. But Jesus was not an either-or thinker. He was both-and. He was for both God and Caesar but in proper order. It is a matter of priorities: to God and to Caesar and the gradation is in terms of whose image is not only on the coin but also in whose image have you been made? The shift in the conversation from paying taxes to repaying is important. Some 40 million persons have been turned back after been invited to the table of life in the USA since 1973. Why? Because of a lack of priority as to whom to repay. Jesus asked to see the coin used. In using the coin, his interlocutors had already entered a relation with the one whose image appeared on the coin. So, Jesus argues that the question is not to whom to pay taxes but to whom to repay for the relationship already established. This is no theoretical question and the confusion arises from the fact that his audience has under-evaluated what they were already doing. Jesus will not say that they should not be in this relationship with Caesar. Better to deal with the devil you know than with the devil you do not know, namely anarchy. Jesus will say only that this relationship is to be worked in the context of a greater relationship with God. The relationship with God is always implied and their imagining God is not to be equated with their imaging Caesar. In equating the images in an either-or, they are hypocritical which mean to underestimate. They have not only underestimated the relationship they must now repay to God but also in their flattery of Jesus, they fall short of their own words: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." (22:16). If they meant what they said, they would not be trying to catch Jesus in his speech.

As human beings, citizens of the world, we live with ambiguity here "until thy kingdom come." So either-or answers to complex questions just do not satisfy. Trying to indict a believer in Jesus the Christ on the basis of life's perennial conundrums, is both an old game but also a self-destructive underestimation. Jesus was not lost for an answer because he had already worked out his priorities. Matthew would like the community to do the same. Don't let anyone trivialize your gift of faith on the basis of an old canard. Give to God what is God's and that is glory and power. That's the priority and the direction. There may not be concrete, one-size-fits-all answers to life's thorny questions. The discussion has to start with the glory and praise of God of all the peoples and nations. For this God is free and can as easily call Cyrus the Persian to his aid as any of his own people. Today's answer may be to-morrow's heresy as was the case of Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28)! Things need to be constantly negotiated. Think of values and the language in which they are expressed. Perennial doctrine may have made an idol of the language in which we limited human beings express something of the glory and power of God revealed in the Gospel.

Now to Thessalonica. Paul, Timothy and Silvanus present themselves as "remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess 1:3) How they live the virtues of faith hope and charity is writers' to evaluate. The correspondence illustrates how they applied a both/and approach to questions of life now and life then on the Lord's return. The discussion of the virtues is not straitjacketed but they are seen to flow together as work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness in hope. This confluence leads to receiving the word with joy in the Holy Spirit. (cf. vs.4-5). Their coherent and well integrated community made them good news to be heard. This description is of a community that has sorted out its priority and that is the call to holiness: "And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." (1 Thess 3:12-13) © 2020 David P. Reid ss.cc.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time 148 SMF 60. Psalm 18 (17) Exodus 22:20-26 1 Thess 1:5-10 Matt 22:34-40  
Response: I love you Lord my strength

The responsorial psalm is made up of the first few verses and the final verse of Psalm 18. This gives us a unique perspective on the readings, the first, Exodus 22 chosen because of the Gospel and the reading from Thessalonians adding depth to that dialog. Jesus goes to Jerusalem and continues to teach there. In Matthew's presentation Jesus is always teacher, now in his ministry, again in his Passion and then as Risen Lord. Every moment is a teachable moment. A great teacher finds the right example and the right words. All the better if the teacher can simply draw out what is going on in the student. Jesus has silenced the Sadducees on the question of the resurrection; now it is time for the Pharisees to silence Jesus on the question of the law's most important commandment. And Jesus who obviously liked to match wits, ups the

ante. No, not which is the greatest but which is the greatest and first to which of course Jesus can add a second.

Love yourself! This is Jesus' doctrine? You must love your neighbor as yourself. If we listen to Paul speaking to the Thessalonians, loving your neighbor as yourself means being good news for your neighbor. How the people at Thessalonica, some of whom had a great difficulty to accept Paul in the first place, are now good news in how they receive the Good News of Jesus. This is a model of evangelization. This ad hoc letter is the movement's first writing, about 49 AD. The greeting and opening thanksgiving is a living example of how to do the Gospel. In fact the outline of the early preaching (called kerygma) is found in verses 9b-10: and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. They served a living and true God in the work of faith, the toil of love and the endurance of hope (verse 3). This is the content of their turning, conversion from idols, not done in word only but in power and the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (v.5).

Did fear of the wrath to come play a part? Short answer is yes because otherwise they had not turned to the living and true God. For anyone to be called true and living God and not be intolerant of sin is not worth the title. God owes it to God's own self to be against sin for as Paul says in Romans 1:17 the Gospel is the revelation of God's righteousness and of God's wrath. The long answer brings us back to the Book of Exodus, that part which is the code of the covenant wherein is gathered all the follow up on the Ten Commandments, integral to God's covenant with Israel. And there the motivation to love of neighbor is fear of the wrath of God. The concern is the stranger, the widow and the orphan, in other words all the vulnerable who will cry out if they are molested. The closing line (Exodus 22:26) is classic: if the one left bereft of his clothing cries to the Lord I will hear him for I am compassionate. On the one hand, it balances the mention of God's anger as motivation and makes it real; on the other hand, the word "cry" brings the believer back to Exodus 2:23-24 where it is said that in the midst of their struggle with Pharaoh the Lord heard their cry and remembered the covenant that he had made with their ancestors. God's anger is related to keeping a covenant relationship which God does not want violated. This is the true and living God whom Christians have met in Jesus Christ. No wonder that Jesus equates love of God with love of neighbor and goes on to challenge us all to be honest covenant partners. The first and the second are now together the greatest commandment of the law. Luke (10:27) made the same point by placing them both under the same verb, to love. As Jesus goes to Jerusalem he is obeying no other law.

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