

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time--Cycle "A"--2020, St. Leonard 10:30 & online
Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96:1,3,4-5,7-8,9-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

I. Introduction

- A. Commenting on today's readings, Patricia Sanchez wrote: ". . .there is a phrase in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians that fairly demands careful consideration: 'Our preaching of the gospel proved not a mere matter of words for you, but one of power' (v. 5) Is not this the intended goal every time the good news is announced? But how can the words of the gospel leap from the pages of the lectionary and become power? How can these words leave the safe sanctuary of the church and become a lived reality and a force to be reckoned with in the street? the office?, the market?, the factory?, the school?, the club?, the restaurant?, the boardroom?
"Words can become power only if we take them with us. The 'portability' of the word is of course greatly enhanced by a good homily which arouses listeners in the pews to hunger for the nourishment it provides and then points them in the right direction in order to find it. In the end however, the decision to actually carry home something of the good news is a personal one. . . .
"Keeping the word means that my life is woven together and supported upon a tapestry of weekly liturgies where I have been fed [and feted]. Keeping the word means that I am eager to carry with me from each Sunday's liturgical celebration some sacred morsel of the good news, and that every day of the week, I am willing to return to that source of nourishment, unwrap it and let it speak to whatever new and different or routine and monotonous direction my path has taken. Keeping the word means that I will allow its message to challenge and to chastise me, to change and to move me, just as I expect the sweetness of the word to comfort and encourage me. Keeping the word means that I am no longer 'flying solo' in this life. Nor am I sole master or mistress of my destiny: Rather, every word and work, every personal encounter, every relationship, every decision, every choice, every project, every goal and aspiration must be somehow informed and influenced by the word that I have heard, carried with me, and kept."
(Sanchez Archive, Ordinary 29 A)
- B. Now you may remember that the second reading on Ordinary Sundays is not chosen to match the first reading and the gospel. But today it seems a good place to start our consideration of those other two readings.

II. One God Over All

- A. In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah proclaims God's words to Cyrus, the Persian king. Cyrus is a pagan, yet God calls him God's anointed one, which translates as the Messiah. What a shock that must have been to the Israelites! A pagan king is God's Messiah, God's anointed one? God indicates that Cyrus is God's instrument to free Israel from their captivity in Babylon and return them to the Promised Land.
- B. What is also clear in this passage is God's dominion over all the earth: "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."
- C. If this is so, then we all ought to listen attentively to God's word and make it the purpose of our lives to live by that word, to carry it out. As St. Paul insists, "... our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction." It is a word of power that comes from the master of the universe. Do you think we ought to listen to that word? And take it home with us?

III. Other Gods

- A. The problem, of course, is that there are lesser gods whom we are tempted to adore. All kinds of people and forces in life try to demand ultimate loyalty from us. And that brings us to the so often misunderstood words of Jesus in today's Gospel.
- B. "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." You know how often that line has been used to insist on the separation of church and state and even the separation of religion and daily life, as if God should stay inside the church and let the rest of the world be ruled by lesser gods. I suspect every preacher who addresses real life issues has had that line thrown at him or her more than once, insisting that homilies shouldn't address issues that might have political implications.
- C. But none of that is what Jesus was saying. It helps to consider what was going on in this episode. The Pharisees and the Herodians, normally bitter opponents who agreed on almost nothing, did agree that Jesus was a threat to their power and status. So they set out to trap him. The question about paying taxes to Rome is a lot like questions thrown at politicians today—designed to anger half the audience no matter how the question is answered. If Jesus says to pay the tax, he will be branded as a collaborator with the occupying foreign power. If he says not to pay it, he can be reported to the Roman authorities for arrest and possible execution for defying the Empire.
- D. Jesus is clever enough to avoid the trap, but his response is not just safe diversion to get out of a bind. He asks his questioners to show him the coin with which the tax must be paid, and he asks about both the image and the inscription on the coin. The coin had an image of the Emperor Tiberius, who ruled between 14 and 37 CE, and an inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Both the image and the inscription are blasphemous to the Jews. Jews, remember, were not to have any graven images, but here they are carrying one around in their purses. And the coin calls the emperor son of Augustus, considered a god.
- E. So Jesus denies the divinity of Augustus and Tiberius and insists that they only are due what the coin is worth. But the real God deserves everything God has created, especially what bears the image of the true God. And every Jew within earshot would certainly remember the words of Genesis that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. So, pay the tax—that keeps the Romans from arresting you— but give yourself to God.

IV. Conclusion: God's Image

- A. The 16th century saint Lawrence of Brindisi puts it well: "We are made in the 'image and likeness of God.' So you, O Christian, because you are a human being, are God's tribute money—a little coin bearing the image and likeness of the divine emperor. Therefore with Christ I ask, 'whose likeness and inscription is this?' Your answer is, God's. To which I reply, Then why not give God what belongs to him?
If we really want to be God's image, we must be like Christ, for his is the image of God's goodness and 'the perfect copy of his nature,' and God 'foreordained that those he has chosen should take on a likeness to his son.'" (liturgy.slu.edu, Oct. 18, 2020)
- B. Fr. John Foley puts it this way: "Could it be that we ourselves are those 'things that belong to God' that Jesus spoke of? . . . If this were so, why wouldn't we want to give ourselves to God, and then also to bring our God-filled selves to Caesar's palaces and to the dirty roads outside them and show everyone what Jesus is all about? (*Ibid.*)
- C. That might be a good thought to carry home today on this Mission Sunday. While we support missionaries abroad, we are all called to be missionaries where we live. Give to God what belongs to God, especially yourself.