

29th Sunday of the Year A

First Reading Isaiah 45:1.4-6

Thus say the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whom he has taken by his right hand to subdue nations before him and strip the loins of kings, to force gateways before him that their gates be closed no more: It is for the sake of my servant Jacob, of Israel my chosen one, that I have called you by your name, conferring a title though you do not know me. I am the Lord, unrivalled; there is no other God besides me. Though you do not know me, I arm you that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that, apart from me, all is nothing.

Second Reading 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

From Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the Church in Thessalonika which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; wishing you grace and peace. We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all, and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know, brothers and sisters, that God loves you and that you have been chosen, because when we brought the Good News to you, it came to you not only as words, but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction.

Gospel Matthew 22:15-21

The Pharisees went away to work out between them how to trap Jesus in what he said.

And they sent their disciples to him, together with the Herodians, to say, "Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, "You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for me? Let me see the money you pay the tax with." They handed him a denarius, and he said, "Whose head is this? Whose name?" "Caesar's," they replied. He then said to them, "Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God."

Meditation

"Give to the Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's."

This clear-cut retort of Jesus does not claim to say all that must be said about Christian participation in civic life. We must take the passage as a whole in order to avoid two extremes: political systems which would co-opt the Church through favour and those which would exclude it by force.

The Church for its part must avoid the temptation to give to God what is Caesar's, to use religion's power to dominate society. "Is it lawful to pay tax to the Emperor or not?" The adversaries of Jesus and the partisans of the Roman occupation here join forces to trap this Galilean who challenges the established order. In the volatile contest of a proud Judean nationalism which bitterly resents taxation as an ignominious sign of subjection to Rome, this is an explosive question.

If Jesus refuses the tribute to Caesar, he places himself on the side of the violent revolutionaries.

If he authorizes it, his religious integrity is compromised. These questioners who feign embarrassment are hypocrites. Their pockets are full of Caesar's coins. In fact, they acknowledge the supreme power of the "Lord of Lords", the Roman Emperor. Jesus eludes the trap.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's but give God what is God's!" Jesus appeals to the Absolute who topples the idols of power. "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Ph 2:11): this cry of primitive faith will forever deny Caesar's claims to absolute divine power. It stands in judgment against the hypocrites who use political or religious ideologies to enslave humanity.