

October 18, 2020 St. Augustine/Crowley Center 11:30 a.m.

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Scripture Readings we've just listened to on this 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time are profound, and focus our attention on the basic Truth of God's Revelation about Himself.

In today's First Reading, we heard the Prophet Isaiah very clearly saying, on God's behalf: *"I am the Lord and there is no other; there is no God besides Me."* We heard that same message repeated over and over again in today's Psalm Response: that we are to *"Give the Lord glory and honor"* in all that we do. And that really was the message that Jesus was delivering in the Gospel passage we just heard. For the first Sunday in quite a while, our Gospel Reading does not include one of Jesus' profound and inspiring Parables which He used to teach us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

Jesus didn't need a Parable for what He needed to say to those whom He saw to be religious hypocrites. Just when the Pharisees thought they would be able to paint Jesus into the "proverbial corner" from which He'd not be able to get out, He delivered a teaching that not only foiled their attempt, but one that has endured the test of time, and that people everywhere, whether People of Faith or not, recognize and often use in their own arguments.

As we've come to see in the last few Sunday Gospels, the Pharisees were at their "wits end" with Jesus, so they had begun trying to figure out how to "get rid of Him". And so, as we heard today, *"they plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech"*. They weren't slightly interested in the Truth, of course; they just wanted Him to say something that they could "spin" into what the Roman authorities might consider to be treasonous, and then they could do their "dirty work" for them. So the Herodians, who were acting on behalf of the Pharisees, went to Jesus and first of all praised Him for how great He is..... *"Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man...that you are not concerned with anyone's opinion,...."* But then, they immediately asked the question which they felt sure would put Jesus in a "lose-lose" position: *"Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"*

The obligation of citizens to "pay taxes" to the civil authority is as ancient as civilization; it's a world-wide societal law, and though unpopular, a responsibility that most people realize they have to accept. But discussing that issue of "paying taxes" was as volatile an issue then as it is now. Instead of telling a Parable, Jesus

teaches a lesson by using a “visual aide” to make His point. St. Matthew tells us that Jesus “*knew their malice*”; so He asked if they had a coin used to pay the Roman tax. Then He asked them: “*whose image and inscription*” was on the coin? And when they answered that it was Caesar’s inscription, Jesus gave His brilliant response: “*Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.....but, give to God what belongs to God.*”

In Jesus’ day, “Caesar” was the Emperor that the Romans considered to be divine; but throughout the rest of history, “Caesar” has come to mean: “any duly-elected government leader/head of State”, whoever that may be. What was brilliant about Jesus’ answer is in reminding us that we do have responsibilities to be good citizens; we are to be contributing members of society; we are to abide by the laws of the land while also knowing that our government leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of protecting, defending and serving the needs of its citizens. So, “*we should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*”. But, at the same time, our Faith reminds us that no human leader is “divine”; there is only One Divinity, and so we must also “*give to God what belongs to God*”.

But, if Jesus wanted to, He could have used an additional “visual aide” by pointing to any person in that crowd, or any person to ever live, and asked a similar question: “Whose image is in this person---and Whose inscription is on this person?” The entire crowd listening to Him, including the “Herodians” and the Pharisees, knew very well what we heard proclaimed in today’s First Reading: “*There is no One other than God Who is our Lord!*” They probably knew off by heart the Creation Account from the Book of Genesis, that the Lord God, the Creator of all the world, made the human person “in the image of Himself” as the summit of all creation.

Each and every one of us is made in the “image and likeness of God”. And so, just as Caesar’s image was on the coin, which means that we are to “*give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*”, so too the “*image of God*” is on the soul of every human being. God’s “*inscription*” is written on the heart of every person. Therefore, since we belong to Him, we must “*give to God what belongs to God*”. This very basic, but extremely important, concept is one that we need to ponder: what belongs to God?..... Hmmmm

While most of us “own” a lot of things, and have a huge amount of “possessions”; while some of you may be parents, and grandparents of children; and while we may all see ourselves as “in charge” of our own destinies---the fact

is that “everything” belongs to God. All that we have; all that we are; all that is, including this beautiful world in which we are temporarily living---it all belongs to God. Parents certainly realize that children are a “gift”; each child is a unique and special human life entrusted into your care to love, care for, educate, and form in the ways of God, and to put those children on the right path that will lead them to Heaven.

As one of Jesus’ Parables recently reminded us: all of us are “stewards” of all that we have, beginning with our own lives; we are to care for what is given to us, and then, we must give an accounting to the Owner of what we’ve taken care of during our lives.

What Jesus is not teaching is that our civic responsibilities are in one basket of our daily life, and our responsibilities to God in another basket, and “never the twain shall meet”. No, our responsibilities both to God and to civil society are in our one and only basket of responsibilities which we are to faithfully fulfill. That’s why Jesus’ teaching makes so much sense: *“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.”*

Down thru the ages, who “Caesar” is changes; governments change; social conditions change; cultural mores and values change. But there are two things that do not change: 1) as people who live in this world and are subject to the rightful authority of the State, we have a definite responsibility to repay to “Caesar” what belongs to Caesar. But, 2) as people whose ultimate destiny and goal is Heaven, we have a basic responsibility to God---and therefore, we must “repay to God what belongs to God”.

As People of Faith, living in the world of “Caesar”, we always have choices and decisions to make, and they are never easy. We all certainly realize that we’re currently living in a period of our own country’s history when making decisions about the upcoming election and seeing our way to a clear understanding of how to vote and who to support is probably as challenging as it can be. While our Government Leaders may, or may not be, People of Faith, we need to pray for them regularly, as we usually do at every Mass. It is very much like Cyrus, the King of Persia who we heard about in today’s First Reading. Cyrus conquered Babylon where the Israelites were living in exile. Though he was an unbeliever, he treated the Israelite People being held in bondage with compassion and allowed them to leave to return to their own country. Even though he did not believe in God, he was actually, though indirectly, helping to fulfill God’s Plan for His people.

That's why Isaiah referred to this Pagan as "*God's anointed*", and kept saying in God's Name: "*though you knew Me not, it was I who armed you*" and enabled you to be successful. And so, in a similar way, we pray that our Government leaders will protect and safeguard the rights of all people, made in the image and likeness of God, and protect the dignity of each person, beginning with the unborn, and continuing with those who are immigrants, the vulnerable; those with disabilities and special needs; that they will end violence and war, work for peaceful and just solutions to all issues, and protect the right to life until a person's final natural breath. We pray that we can choose Leaders who will act "on behalf of God" and be "God's agents", even if they don't know God.

At this time of year, I receive a number of letters. And I can tell you that they're not all for the purpose of wishing me a happy day; many of them are being critical of the Church's positions on what they call "political issues", or even my own recent Letter to the Faithful about forming our consciences according to the teachings of the church. Those who write those letters often tell me that I have overstepped my responsibilities, and remind me that we are a country that follows the principle of the "separation of church and state". But, as I'm sure we all remember from our Civics Classes, that important principle flows from the First Amendment to our Constitution, and it primarily restricts the Government from interfering in the internal affairs of religion or infringing on the free practice of Religion. And while it limits the Government's influence on Religion, it does not keep People of Faith from bringing their religious motivations into the public dialogue and the deliberations on the issues of the day.

And so as we try to be responsible citizens, and prepare to exercise our right to elect our leaders, let us be mindful of much more than just political issues, with perceived political gains for the so-called "winners". Rather, may we fulfill our civic responsibilities with the greater awareness that we are citizens made with the Image of God inscribed on our hearts, charged with the goal to help our society to be built up into the Kingdom of God which Jesus has already established, so that there are no "winners" and "losers"; only those who are treated with God's Love and Mercy.

Let us definitely repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But let us be even more committed to give to God what belongs to God: all that we have, all that we are, everything that is or ever will be. Why? Because, as God Himself tells us: "*I am the Lord; there is no other. There is no God besides Me!*" God bless you now and always!