

HOMILY FOR TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 11 October 2020

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 145

Reading 1 IS 45:1, 4-6

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus,
whose right hand I grasp,
subduing nations before him,
and making kings run in his service,
opening doors before him
and leaving the gates unbarred:
For the sake of Jacob, my servant,
of Israel, my chosen one,
I have called you by your name,
giving you a title, though you knew me not.
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.

Responsorial Psalm PS 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

R. (7b) **Give the Lord glory and honor.**

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

R. **Give the Lord glory and honor.**

For great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
awesome is he, beyond all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are things of nought,
but the LORD made the heavens.

R. **Give the Lord glory and honor.**

Give to the LORD, you families of nations,

give to the LORD glory and praise;
give to the LORD the glory due his name!
Bring gifts, and enter his courts.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Worship the LORD, in holy attire;
tremble before him, all the earth;
say among the nations: The LORD is king,
he governs the peoples with equity.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Reading 2 1 THES 1:1-5B

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you,
remembering you in our prayers,
unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love
and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,
before our God and Father,
knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God,
how you were chosen.

For our gospel did not come to you in word alone,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.

Alleluia PHIL 2:15D, 16A

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Shine like lights in the world
as you hold on to the word of life.

R. Alleluia, alleluia

Gospel MT 22:15-21

The Pharisees went off
and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.
They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying,
"Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man
and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.
And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion,
for you do not regard a person's status.
Tell us, then, what is your opinion:
Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"
Knowing their malice, Jesus said,

"Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?
Show me the coin that pays the census tax."
Then they handed him the Roman coin.
He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?"
They replied, "Caesar's."
At that he said to them,
"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar
and to God what belongs to God."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

"Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Is this the most quoted passage from the New Testament? (I am ashamed to say, that perhaps somewhat more quoted, at least in the United States, is "the poor you shall always have with you").

If "repay to Caesar" is much quoted, it is also much misunderstood. I offer as proof of this claim the fact that today's Gospel is being tossed about by pundits (on the left and the right) as they discuss the nomination of Judge Amy Barrett to a seat on the Supreme Court of the United States.

Some of these comments are way out of line – reminiscent of the bad old days when Catholics (like Al Smith) weren't "real Americans" because they owed an allegiance to a "foreign prince" (the pope). Other comments are ill-advised – like the claim that Judge Barrett should "render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" by keeping her Catholic faith and its ethical demands strictly private. This kind of secularism is intolerant as well as naïve. Think of all the US presidents (and judges) who have taken (secret) oaths to their fellow Masons.

The question I want to explore today speaks to our current affairs: what does it mean for Judge Barrett to be a "citizen of faith"? What does it mean for us all to be citizens of faith? The Good News is that this passage from the Gospel according to Matthew is loaded with insight for us all.

Let me give you some context for the Gospel reading the Church has provided us today.

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and entered the Temple precincts. (The fact that this encounter takes place in Jerusalem and within the Temple precincts is going to become immensely important very quickly).

After entering Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the Temple and expels the money-changers doing business there. He also gives a number of very pointed parables directed against the high priests and other establishment types in Jerusalem. (Check out the Gospel readings for the last two weeks). Tensions are high.

The Pharisees went off
and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.

So the Pharisees send a delegation to Jesus with a group of Herodians in tow. The Pharisees were Jews who were wealthy enough to be fastidiously observant of the law down to the smallest detail. The Herodians were officials in the administration of King Herod, the Jewish strong-man cooperating with the Roman occupation. Both groups want to rid themselves of this meddlesome rabbi from up in Galilee.

Jesus's adversaries begin to bait a trap:

"Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man
and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.
And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion,
for you do not regard a person's status.

Remember, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus refuses to equate wealth and high social status with virtue and holiness. Remember also that Jesus is part of a society under military occupation.

Now comes the trap:

"Tell us, then, what is your opinion:
Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"

Why is this a trap? If Jesus answers "yes," the Pharisees will call him a traitor to his people and a blasphemer. If Jesus answers "no," the Herodians will charge Jesus with sedition.

This tax was a flashpoint in Palestine. It was paid to the Roman military occupation. It was collected by Jews who operated as entrepreneurs. They would pay a sum to the Roman authorities in return for a license to collect taxes equal to that sum plus a little more as a commission – a blueprint for corruption and shake-downs, especially of the poor. The Romans got their money and the poor got their shaft.

The Pharisees, being religiously observant, had plenty of arguments about why paying the tax was a violation of the Law of Moses. For starters, the Roman emperor (Tiberius at the time) claimed to be a god. Paying taxes to this god was a violation of the First Commandment. Also, it is no accident that the Pharisees had the Herodians with them. The Herodians were Jewish officials of the Roman government. Some of them were probably making a killing by collecting the tax.

The question they ask of Jesus is clever: "Is it lawful...?" They don't specify if they mean lawful according to Roman law (clearly yes) or according to the Law of Moses (clearly no).

We all know Jesus's response to this trap.

Knowing their malice, Jesus said,
"Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?
Show me the coin that pays the census tax."

The Pharisees dig into their purse and come up with a Roman coin.

Then they handed him the Roman coin.
He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?"
They replied, "Caesar's."

Now the time has come to remember, as I mentioned earlier, that this nasty attempt to entrap Jesus took place not only in Jerusalem, but also within the Temple precincts. So, here's the rub: The Romans expected their subjects to worship the emperor. Tiberius was a self-proclaimed god. One of his titles was "pontifex," which means the "bridge between heaven and earth." Statues of this divinity were placed in every city of the empire, with mandatory worship requirements. The one exception was Jerusalem. Jews would not allow any "graven image" of a false god in Jerusalem and certainly not in the Temple precincts. There had been riots over this. So, however reluctantly, the Romans had made an exception for this "irksome people." No graven images of emperor-gods were to be found in Jerusalem.

But Jesus and his adversaries are not only in Jerusalem. They are in the Temple itself. Jesus demands a coin used to pay the tax and then pointedly asks,

"Whose image is this and whose inscription?"

And the answer, of course, is that the image is that of Caesar. The Pharisees and their Herodian side-kicks have brought a graven image of a false god into the Temple. Jesus's adversaries, thinking they could trick Jesus into saying something blasphemous that could get him arrested, end up being confronted by their own hypocrisy. Remember, in firing back, Jesus calls them hypocrites

"Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?"

This issue for us, however, is not the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the Herodians. We have a good deal in common with both the Pharisees and the Herodians, but it is not hypocrisy. Like the Pharisees and the Herodians, we are all entangled in a society that is morally ambiguous when we judge it from the perspective of our faith and the moral demands of faith.

When I say that "we" have a good deal in common with the Pharisees and the Herodians, I mean you and me, of course. But I also mean Judge Amy Barrett and those members of the Senate who are asking her questions and all those who would criticize her for her faith and

all those who insist that her faith must have nothing to do with her service on the Supreme Court of the United States.

Whether we like it or not, the world does not factor neatly into good and evil. I don't support those who insist that a Catholic (or a person of any faith) *must reject* a candidate for political office because of their position on any particular issue. For that matter, I don't support those who insist that we *must vote* for a candidate because of her position on one particular issue.

If we are to be faithful citizens, we have to embrace many civic and theological virtues.

- We have to listen and read and debate with our neighbors.
- We have to reflect critically on our faith, its vision of hope, its solidarity with the poor and its sizable ethical demands.
- We have to work together to discern a practical path forward in a morally ambiguous world and we need to do this discerning in dialogue with all those who make up our political community.

As citizens of faith, we must cultivate virtues that allow us to live with ambiguity and virtues that enable us to stand up for what is right, whether or not it's popular. All this is simply to say that we are required to cultivate a well-formed conscience as part of our responsibility as faithful participants in political society.

A "good conscience" is not some kind of trump-card that we get to play as a way of never having to change our mind or to compromise. Quite the opposite. A good conscience is a moral compass that arises as part of an on-going process of discerning the common good in concrete situations in light of the demands of the Gospel. A good conscience is a spiritual process, not gavel we bring down to end a discussion.

After they admit that they have taken a graven image into the Temple, Jesus tells his adversaries that they are to

"repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

This is not a warrant for saying that religious faith is a purely private matter with no implications for how we live together, what laws we enact or how we vote. Instead, it is a demand that we struggle to form political convictions shaped by our hope in God and the teachings of our Church.

Whenever we come into a church to offer a prayer, we need to remember that we have a "coin of tribute" in our purse with Caesar's image on it. As people of faith, we have a responsibility to a morally ambiguous society. Somehow, together, we must find a way of being obedient to God, not only as people of faith, but as faithful citizens as well.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* (“divine reading”). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?