

29TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, CYCLE A OCT 22, 2017

First Reading: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 (I have grasped the right hand of Cyrus to save Israel)

Responsorial Psalm 96 "Give the Lord glory and honor."

Second Reading: Thessalonians 1:1-5b (the action of faith, the work of love & the endurance of hope.)

Alleluia Verse: "Shine like lights in the world as you hold on to the word of life."

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-21 (Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, & to God what belongs to God)

♪♪ Guide my feet while I run this race; Guide my feet while I run this race,
Guide my feet while I run this race 'cause I don't want to run this race in vain. ♪♪

That song is an African-American spiritual. A people suffering from oppression and seeking freedom are asking for guidance and support in their search for a better life. Some other verses include "Hold my hand" & "Stand by me." & my favorite, ♪♪ "I'm your child." ♪♪

The Scriptures for today are about the promise of the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ to guide our feet & our hearts, to stand by us & to remind us that we are beloved children of God.

In the Gospel for today, the Pharisees with their mortal enemies, the Herodians come to Jesus & *pretend* to ask him to guide their choices. The Herodians were a political party that wanted to restore Herod or someone from his family to the throne in Judea. The Pharisees wanted to restore the kingdom of David to Israel. Both groups see Jesus as a threat. They are really trying to trick him into taking sides. Jesus exposes their trick and refuses to eliminate the tension between being a faithful Jew and living in the Roman Empire.

He asks for a coin - the Pharisees, if they were to practice what they preached, were not even supposed to *have* a Roman denarius, a coin which had the image of Caesar on it and the inscription "*Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, high priest.*"

They are trying to get Jesus to play the either/or game. They want him to say he's with the Zealots, who refused to pay taxes & wanted to overthrow the Roman government by violence, OR to say he is with those who collaborate with oppressors, like the tax collectors he associates with and the Herodians who do it in secret.

Jesus says: it's not *either/or* it's *both/and*. You can pay taxes, but God outranks Caesar. God can even use human governments to do God's work. That's the message of the first reading about Cyrus, a pagan king who saves the people of Israel from exile. When Jesus says, "*give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but give to God what belongs to God,*" he is saying something like what he said at the last supper when he told his followers that they were called to be **IN** the world but not **OF** the world.

Jesus says to us, "You are in the world, and I am not going to remove you from the world where you will have to go to school, pay taxes, earn a living, raise a family."

We are in a world that is full of sin, sickness and death, but it is also full of heroism, healing and birth. Our allegiance, our values, our deepest connection is to a higher power, to the God in whose image we are made. We do not belong to Caesar or to any human leader, we belong to God as his beloved children.

There were several ways the Jews of Jesus' time responded to their world situation. They were like scripts that different groups followed, each telling its own story. Jesus refuses to follow any of these scripts.

Unlike the *Pharisees*, he reconciles and forgives sinners. He does not fulfill *their* dream of a military overthrow of the Romans.

Unlike the Zealots, he chooses to die rather than to kill or use violence to achieve his goals.

Unlike the Essenes, he will not withdraw from the world, but remains in relationship even with his enemies.

Unlike the Herodians, he does not compromise his values to get along.

His story is about living creatively in the tension between the world and the Gospel. Jesus shocks the Pharisees by saying, "*Give to God what belongs to God!*" implying that they are not really doing it. His story, his script is about building the kingdom of God rather than purging the community of sinners or killing the enemy or protecting your security & investments or running away to a perfect community.

Those scripts & that tension are present today as they were in Jesus time. What is written on our money & displayed in our courtrooms? IN GOD WE TRUST!

But in reality, do we trust God or do we trust money? I think Jesus would say a few things about money today - he would probably take a dollar bill and say: "*Use money, but trust God!*" Then he would challenge our world which so often trusts money & uses God to justify getting richer. He would challenge us to care for each other & to work together for justice and peace. We live in a culture of individualism and greed, but we do not have to live out of those values. We may not be able to change the culture in the wider world, but we can create a culture of love and truth in our own circle of relationships.

Sr. Anna & I belong to religious congregations that provide support & vision for our lives & our ministry. But, closer to our everyday lives, we meet regularly with a group of laymen & women to share faith, prayer, & stories of our everyday life.



We are not all the same, and don't agree about everything, but we choose to listen & respect each other & to support one another when anyone has a need. You can do the same with one another. It is why we are gathered here to ask the Spirit of God to guide our feet. The early Christians would call that kind of gathering "church."



[Anna] We meet regularly with a contemplative prayer group based on the 11th step of AA & other 12 step groups. ["We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God; praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out."] Our regular host is named Stasia. She is over 90, and, after a recent hospital stay, she found herself in need of a home health aide who could come on Mondays. Fr. Peter & I had promised her daughter, who lives out of state, that we would look for someone who could help, but had no success. We prayed for guidance, and discerned that *we* were called to help her until we found a Monday aide.

When we went to her home that Monday morning, I went into her bedroom to help her get dressed. Stasia told Peter that she wanted coffee and sent him off to Stewart's to get her a coffee & a blueberry muffin. When he arrived there, he saw someone he knew from the parish sitting in a booth. Tom asked him why he was there. Tom's wife then came to the booth. When she heard of Stasia's need, she said, "I know Stasia. Her children used to babysit my children. My Monday's are open and I can do that. I'm a retired nurse" We had prayed for guidance, and the Spirit showed us the way, but not in a way we could have foreseen or controlled.

[Peter] The strategy for living the vision of seeking God's will is outlined in the reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. St. Paul describes a life of "Proving your faith and laboring in love and showing constancy in hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." The original Greek literally says that we are called to "*the action of faith, the work of love and the endurance of hope.*" St. Paul makes it very clear that faith is something we *do* rather than something we have or a set of truths to accept in our minds.

Sometimes we focus only on the flaws & mistakes we see in the Catholic Church, but the vision of what the church is called to be is something we can begin to live out here & now.

The 2nd Vatican Council in the 1960's put that vision into words which I read this past week, *"The Church ... communicates the divine life to humankind and reflects the light of that life to the world. She does this especially through her work of restoring and enhancing the dignity of the human person, of strengthening the fabric of human society and enriching the daily activity of women & men with a deeper meaning and importance."*

We are the church gathered here tonight, so we are called & empowered to live out that vision. To paraphrase a few more words from Vatican II:

We can make a great contribution, as individuals and as communities, toward bringing a greater humanity to the human family and to its history,

The Eucharist we celebrate is an expression of GOD's vision of who we are & a power source for us to live that vision - in the world, after we leave this Mass. It is our communion with Christ and each other that connects us with the Spirit of God who empowers us to love people & use things, to use money lovingly & to trust God in faith & hope.

I'd like to end with a prayer that I pray every morning, and try to live throughout the day. It is the longer version of the "Serenity Prayer" adopted by AA & other 12 step groups:

*God,
Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You in the eternal now of the resurrection.*

