

**God or Caesar: Who is in Control? 29th Sunday Year A, October 18th, 2020.
(Isaiah 45:1,4-6, 1Thes 1:1-5b, Matthew 22:15-21)**

The IRS received a letter that said, “Dear IRS, my conscience has been bothering me. I am including a check for 5000 dollars to pay my back taxes.” If my conscience continues to bother me, I will send the rest.” Do we perform our civic duty? On this 29th Sunday, we have a famous gospel passage appropriate at this time of elections. Jesus says, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” This statement has been interpreted in so many ways. It is about “God or Caesar: Who is in control?” Isaiah in our 1st reading says that there is a relationship between faith and politics, but God is in control of everything.

God revealed to Isaiah that a pagan King called Cyrus would be God’s anointed chosen to free the Israelites from exile. In the year 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and became the world’s leader. This pagan King observed the faith and religious lifestyle of the Jews and wondered why they ended up in exile in Babylon. Upon learning from Daniel how it all happened, King Cyrus freed the Israelites. As they were returning to Jerusalem, the King gave them gifts of gold, silver, gave back all their temple vessels and allowed them to cut his royal trees to rebuild their temple. In all these, Cyrus was unaware that he was being used by God to bless and deliver his people.

Isaiah had prophesied this 200 years before King Cyrus came into the picture proving that whatever God promises comes true. Again, it shows that God recognised King Cyrus as the legitimate ruler of the world. Israel had to recognise

that God is their master, and that God was controlling historical event through his servant Cyrus, so obedience to Cyrus is legitimate and must not be confused. In the gospel, we hear that some Pharisees and Herodians were sent to trap Jesus publicly. The Pharisees were anti-tax people and the Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas and the Roman power. These two enemies would naturally not agree, but in this case, they came together to outsmart Jesus. It was really a waste of time and effort to try to outsmart God.

They asked, “Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar or not.” If Jesus said Yes, he would be accused of recognising the pagan Roman government and such admission would be denying that God alone should rule his people. If he told the Jews not to pay tax, he would be accused of inciting people not to obey the Roman government. But Jesus rather outsmarted them by stating a divine principle. “Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” What belongs to God? The divine principle in this statement is that God is the creator of the universe and everything in it belongs to God including Caesar’s coin. The psalmist says it beautifully, “Give the Lord glory and power. It was the Lord who made the universe.” Everything belongs to God and He controls everything including secular authorities.

So, we must also pay taxes to the government for the common good and obey the laws unless they conflict with God’s laws as interpreted by the church. The coin bears Caesar’s image, but we bear God’s image on our hearts, minds and souls. (Gen. 1:27) We owe God our very lives and it is a call on us to give all that we have and all that we are to God. In our 2nd reading Paul prays for the Thessalonian

community for their faith, hope and love they have shown in Jesus. Let us also pray for our political leaders, that like Cyrus they too may use our taxes and God's gifts to do his will. **Amen.**

By Fr. Emmanuel Subaar