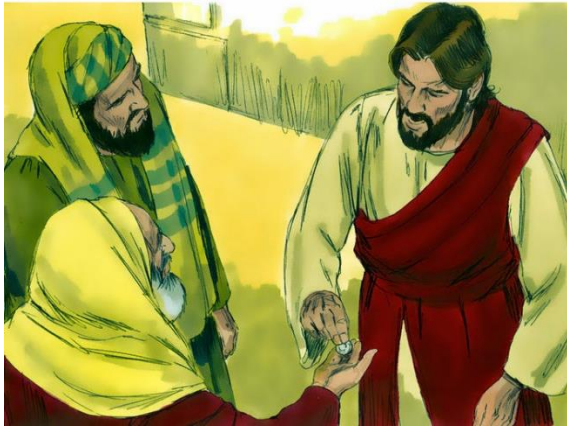


Homily - October 22, 2023
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Time flies. Soon we'll be into the Season of Advent and with that comes a new liturgical year for the Church. We'll say "good-bye" and "thank-you" to the gospel writer Matthew, who guided us through his gospel this past year, and we'll prepare ourselves to welcome Mark as our guide for the upcoming year. But before we say good-bye to Matthew, let's go back to the beginning of Matthew's gospel and the

beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew started us off with Jesus' inaugural speech, the Sermon on the Mount, and in particular the Beatitudes. In the Beatitudes Jesus called us "**blessed**" eight times ("Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, etc.). He also told us that we were the "**light of the world**" and the "**salt of the earth.**" By referring to the blessedness, salt, and light within us, Jesus was telling us that there is some depth dimension to the human person, some divine spark within each of us. Jesus sees and loves in us what we rarely see and love in ourselves. This theme of seeing-and-loving-in-us-what-we-rarely-see-and-love-in-ourselves is in all three Scripture readings today.

In the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah, our Jewish ancestors in faith are on the cusp of being liberated from Babylon. As refugees in a deported country, they have been merely existing, just hanging on by a thread. Fifty years prior, the Babylonians overran their country, Judah, sacked their capital city of Jerusalem, burned down their Temple, and deported the inhabitants to Babylon. Now God is using a pagan, Persian king named Cyrus to be their liberator. Cyrus is not a Jew, not a believer in anything except pagan gods, and he owes nothing to the Jews. Yet God uses Cyrus to defeat the Babylonians, to allow these captives to go back home, restore the homeland, rebuild the Temple and worship the one, true God. What would possess King Cyrus to do this? He owed nothing to these foreigners. He could have kept them in Babylon and retained a good workforce or turned them into his soldiers, but he didn't. He was compelled, driven you might say, by something or someone greater than himself. Before you are driven towards anything worthwhile in life, you are first called.

This pagan king, Cyrus, we are told in the opening line of the first reading, is not only called but anointed by God, one whom he didn't even believe in. ***"Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus..."*** Only priests, prophets and kings—Jewish priests, prophets, and kings—were anointed by God. Yet, here is God, calling and anointing whoever God chooses, the likely and the unlikely, the ally and the enemy, the weak and the powerful, the educated and the high school dropouts. Wherever God finds an open and honest heart, God finds someone perfect for his plans. God goes on to speak in that first reading, ***"Cyrus, I named you, though you did not know me. I armed you, Cyrus, though you did not know me."*** Can you hear God saying to you, "Long before you knew me, long before you even knew about me, long before you were baptized, I called you, I anointed you, you are mine, I call you by name"?

Similarly, in the second reading, Paul encourages the Thessalonians. Paul doesn't brag about what he, Silvanus and Timothy were able to do. Instead, he said to the Thessalonians, ***"I give thanks to God for all of you, for you are brothers and sisters beloved by God, who has chosen you."*** Paul didn't say, "I've clearly been chosen by God, you haven't, so shut up and listen." He says, "You have been chosen, you unlikely people. The message of the Gospel which is word, power and Spirit is in you." Can you hear God saying to you, "Long before you knew me, I knew you? Long before you ever considered yourself an instrument in my hand, I had already called you and was using you!" It's Paul's way of saying, "There is a deeper blessedness, salt, and light within you that you may not be aware of but that I need and the world needs as well." It's always easier to believe it of someone else, and always harder to believe it about ourselves.

The search for our True Self (who we are in God), and the search for the Kingdom of God, finally is the same search. When you find one, you find the other. Both lead you to the truth.

There are two groups of people, in today's gospel, who are on no search at all; they are the Pharisees and the Herodians. Even they are invited to go to a deeper depth within themselves, to the place of blessedness, salt and light, but they will not budge. Though both Herodians and Pharisees are Jewish, they are quite the opposite. Herodians are Jews who have accepted their lot in life and have lost the fire in their bellies to strive for anything more. They are influential, secularized

Jews who favor Roman Law. If it's good enough for king Herod (even though he's a Jewish, puppet king), it's good enough for us. If Herod says we should pay taxes, then who are we to argue? If we benefit from roads and public facilities, then we should pay for them. The Herodians, in favor of King Herod, prefer civil peace even if they sell their souls for it.

The Pharisees, the real agitators in this story, cannot stand the Romans. The Roman coin Jesus asked for, the denarius, bore the image of emperor Tiberius. On the opposite side of the coin was the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Pharisees were particularly disturbed by the fact that Caesar considered himself divine. They were also disturbed by the fact that they were expected to have these idolatrous, graven images in their possession. The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus with their question of whether it is right to pay taxes to the emperor or not.

The stakes could not have been higher. Jesus is in the Temple and countless Jews have gathered for Passover hoping for liberation from the Romans much like their ancestors were liberated from slavery in Egypt. If Jesus sides with paying taxes to the hated Romans, he will be accused of being disloyal to his own religious tradition and possibly stoned to death. But if he says no to paying taxes, he could be reported to the Romans for treason, punished and crucified. Jesus probably held similar ideas as the Pharisees did about carrying an idolatrous image in his pocket and about paying taxes, but this was not a hill worth dying on. There were bigger fish to fry. Jesus himself doesn't have a coin, which is very telling, so he has to ask for one. His punch line is, **"Give to God the things that belong to God."** Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians are doing that. In other words, seek first the Kingdom of God and everything else will take care of itself. No armed rebellions are needed. No excommunication is required. Just quietly give to God what is God's each moment of each day.

Powers Hapgood, an American who lived during the early and mid-twentieth century, was Harvard educated and inherited a factory. But he gave the factory to the workers and was later, just after World War II, arrested for protesting for the poor. In court, the judge asked him: "Mr. Hapgood, you are Harvard educated, why would anyone of your advantages choose to live as you do?" Hapgood replied: "Because of the Sermon on the Mount, sir."

The Sermon on the Mount began with God tells us we were blessedness, salt and light. Before you are driven, you are first called. Something deep called and drove Cyrus. Something deep called and drove the Thessalonians. Something, no Someone, is calling and driving us. Paying taxes? Petty change. Following Jesus? Priceless.

Fr. Phil