

This Sunday's readings – the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time –
[Today's readings](#) are as follows:

- Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
- Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10
- 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b
- Matthew 22:15-21

The following quote from the "Workbook for Lector and Gospel Readers" (Year A, 2002) states the theme for this Sunday's readings – "God will achieve the work of salvation in any situation and will employ the power of nonbelievers to do so if necessary".

In the first reading from Isaiah (2nd Isaiah, written at the end of the Babylonian Captivity), Cyrus was praised. Cyrus (a pagan) was the great Persian king (559-529 BC) who defeated the Babylonians in 538 BC and ultimately freed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. Cyrus was an instrument of Yahweh, "though you knew me not". Note that Cyrus is referred to as "his anointed". Only the Israelite kings were anointed. In Hebrew the word anointed means "messiah" from which we get the word Messiah. To refer to a pagan as the Messiah must have shocked second Isaiah's listeners. However Yahweh chose Cyrus, a pagan, to free the Israelites. All power, either secular or religious, comes from God. "I am the Lord, there is no other". Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column adds this comment about today's first reading – "Deutero-Isaiah (45:1,4-6) saw many people walk away shaking their heads while he was delivering the oracle in the first reading. Called to preach deliverance from the Babylonian Exile, the prophet proclaimed that Yahweh was finally freeing the Chosen People from captivity after 50 years. A "messiah" (an anointed one) was being sent to liberate them. But most people couldn't believe their ears when Deutero-Isaiah announced the messiah's name: Cyrus, the Persian king. How could Yahweh entrust such a sacred mission to an uncircumcised, profane, pagan Gentile? Why would God grasp his right hand, open doors before him and call him by his name? Why would Yahweh go outside His Holy People to find a liberator? The prophet was saying that, to perceive Yahweh's actions correctly, people must read their daily newspapers along with their Sacred Scriptures".

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, we read the story of "Paying Taxes to the Emperor". Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on today's Gospel reading – "Apart from a few stylistic changes, Matthew has taken over this pericope substantially in its Marcan form. He also retains the Marcan context, where it precedes the question of the Sadducees about the resurrection (Mark 12:18-27 / Matt 22:23-33), though Matthew has inserted the parable of the great banquet between the parable of the vineyard and the present pericope. Also, Matthew has rewritten the introduction so as to speak of a *plot* to entrap Jesus. The result of these changes is to emphasize that the episode of the tribute money was part of Jesus' conflict with his opponents. It thus is part of the material with which Matthew seeks to speak directly to the situation of the Church in his day, locked as it was in mortal combat with the Jewish leaders of Jamnia over the question of what was true orthodoxy and who were the true people of God". To the Israelites, only God could rule them, not a secular king like Caesar. Therefore, they believed that paying taxes to Caesar, who considered himself a god, was wrong. It must be remembered that Jesus is not advocating a separation of church and state. In this episode the Pharisees (anti-Roman) team with the Herodians (pro-Roman) to try to trap Jesus. After they ask whether they should pay the census tax, Jesus asks to see the coin in question,

which is the Roman denarius. It showed the head of Tiberius Caesar (14-37 AD) and was inscribed with "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, high priest". As Fr. Roger Karban explains in his 2002 syndicated column – "Our misinterpretation begins with our lack of knowledge about ancient monetary systems. During Jesus' earthly ministry, the king or emperor actually owned all the money. That's why his image and name were on each coin. It belonged to him. He just permitted people to use it". Therefore, if Caesar wanted his money back in the form of a census tax, you had better give it back to him. Jesus countered that secular authority (Caesar) does have its place in society. However, it is only through God's will that secular authority is given its power, as was the case with Cyrus in the first reading. In conclusion, Fr. Karban states – "Jesus probably throws in the last statement -- "Repay to God what belongs to God" -- to remind His followers to be more concerned about what they owe God than what they owe anyone else. In Jesus' mind, the Roman coin, the Jew in whose pocket it is, and the emperor whose image and name are stamped on it all belong to God. Wherever God is, God encompasses all. It's this last point which motivates many of our faith ancestors. The more they experience God, the more they're forced to destroy the limits they place on God's presence and activity". Our allegiance is to God, always.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today's Gospel reading – "In ancient Mediterranean culture, no question is neutral. It is always intended and perceived as a challenge to one's honor. Today's gospel portrays Jesus once again as a master of the cultural game of challenge and riposte.

SETTING THE TRAP

So far Jesus has been fencing with the chief priests and elders. Now the Pharisees and Herodians launch an attack on him. Matthew's editorial comment leaves no doubt about their intentions: the Pharisees intend to entrap Jesus by what he says (22:15). They enlist the Herodians in their plot. The questioners begin with flattery to take Jesus off guard. A Pharisee compliments Jesus on being "honest" (true, a truthful man), teaching the way of God authentically, and caring little about honor, that is, taking no account of any person's status or opinion. In actuality, Jesus was very sensitive to honor. He did care about the opinions of others (Matt 16:13). Eagerness to trap Jesus causes the Pharisees to exaggerate. Jesus is not taken in. Jesus was aware of the malice behind the question and understood the challenge. If he said it was not lawful to pay the tax, he would anger the Roman officials. If he said it was in accord with Torah, he would offend the ardent nationalists who hated everything about the Romans.

TURNING THE TABLES

"Show me the coin that pays the census tax," says Jesus. Before they recognize Jesus' trap, they produce the specific coin. In the time of Jesus, the denarius bore the image of the emperor Tiberius, who ruled between 14 and 37 C.E., and an inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Pharisees were particularly disturbed by the attribution of divinity to Caesar but also considered possession of this graven image to be idolatrous. They devised ways to pay this tax without possessing or handling the coin. It would be very shameful if a Pharisee produced the coin. But if a Herodian in the group produced the coin, the Pharisees would still be shamed by having selected unworthy allies. In either case, the fact that someone in their

group possessed and produced the coin was shameful. Jesus' first riposte to their challenge cuts deep. His second riposte lies in his questions: "Whose head? Whose title?" The inscription and image were plainly visible and clearly legible. The Pharisees' reply sets up Jesus' positive answer: "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." Later (see Luke 23:2) the Pharisees will lie and say that Jesus answered negatively. Actually, Jesus and the Pharisees probably held similar opinions about paying the tax. It could cause more trouble not to pay it. Life is preferable to death, and if this is what it costs to coexist peaceably with the Romans in their empire, so be it.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Jesus' concluding exhortation, "Give to God the things that belong to God," implies that neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians are doing that. This is a serious charge. The Pharisees were so devoted to observing the Torah's 613 commandments that they put a "hedge around the Torah." They proposed observing just a little bit more to be sure of pleasing God. Was Jesus exaggerating their minor foibles as the Pharisees earlier exaggerated Jesus' insensitivity to honor? Whatever the case, Jesus won this contest and reminded his adversaries that what mattered most was pleasing God. Americans tend to see in this passage an argument for the separation of church and state. Such an idea makes no sense in first-century Mediterranean culture. Religion and economics both are embedded in politics and kinship. There was state religion (Temple; empire) and family religion (home); state economics (taxes and redistribution) and family economics (gifts and sharing). Our modern Western situation and its challenges are very different. For us as for our ancestors what matters most is to please God".

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