

God's Anointed Ones, Sent! Cyrus, You and I

Twenty-ninth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – 18 October 2020 **World Mission Sunday**
Readings: Isa 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thess 1:1-5; Mt 22:15-21

“Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped” (Isa 45:1)

Prologue: Today being ‘World Mission Sunday’ it is important to focus on the mission of each and every Christian, which literally means ‘anointed one’. Interestingly and providentially, the first reading speaks of God’s call of a ‘pagan’ king, Cyrus, as being “anointed”. Could not God use each and every person—not only Christians—to be God’s anointed ones and instruments in God’s hands?

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Post-Enlightenment till today, there is a strong tendency to segregate sacred from secular, religion from politics, and God from king. However, this was neither the case in the time of Isaiah nor in the time of Christ. The prophet, second-Isaiah, who lived with the exiles in Babylon, sees God not only as reigning over the Jews but also as a God of history and of the whole world. Therefore, everything and everyone is at God’s beck and call as instruments in order to achieve divine purposes. Today’s first reading contains a shocking salutation to a ‘pagan’ Persian emperor, Cyrus. More shocking is that Cyrus is mentioned as God’s ‘anointed’ one — a title given exclusively to kings, prophets and priests of God’s Chosen People — “whose *right* hand I [God] have grasped” (v.1). While ‘hand’ in general evokes biblical images of both, power and grace, blessing and curse, “*right* hand” (as opposed to “left hand”) has two added significances: [a] of prominence, prestige or favoured position as Jesus being seated at the *right hand* of God; and, [b] of immense power and strength (see Ex 15:6,12; Pss 17:7; 18:35; 21:8; 118:15-16; 138:7). Cyrus is the only ‘pagan’ of whom God says: “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name ... though you do not know me.” (v.4). It matters little whether someone knows or does not know God. God is free to choose anyone for anything. On World Mission Sunday, this reading aptly indicates how God calls, consecrates and commissions even a so-called ‘pagan’ to work for God. Indeed, as seen in his decree (2 Chron 36:23), Cyrus is God’s instrument for restoring Israel and Jerusalem’s Temple.
2. Today’s gospel passage is a so-called ‘pronouncement story’ with a threefold form: (a) setting, (b) action, and (c) pronouncement. First, the ‘*setting*’ is a trap planned by the Pharisees with help from the Herodians. However, the Pharisees, fearful of Jesus’ immense wisdom and influence among the people, “sent their disciples” (v.16). In normal times, the Pharisees and the Herodians hated each other. However, each group seeks backup reinforcement from the other to destroy a ‘common enemy’. Hypocrites that they are at heart, their lips too are deceptively sugary sweet with what we call ‘buttering’ in their exaggerated praise of Jesus. He sees through their flattery and calls them “hypocrites!” (v.18). Their question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” was like placing a double-edged sword of Damocles over Jesus’ neck. Jesus was caught in no-win situation. On the one hand, had he said ‘Yes’ he would be betraying his own Jewish people who hated the Romans for imposing backbreaking taxes on them; but, on the other hand, were he to say ‘No’ he would be accused of treason by the Herodians for dishonouring the Roman taxation system and instigating others to do likewise.

3. Jesus' *'action'* of asking for a coin is a masterstroke; for, on the one hand, he is seen as not having one and thus unattached to money, and, on the other, it shows where he has come from: God. By contrast, the mere fact that the Pharisees' disciples possess such coins, they are guilty of admitting not only their love for money but also their obligation to the Roman authorities. And when they produce a coin, and say that the image on it is Caesar's, Jesus does *not* answer their question, but evades it, with the Caesar-God punch line (the *'pronouncement'*). Here, Jesus is not proposing a political ethic of sacred-secular segregation, but saying something like: "You filthy fellows, hypocrites! Your pockets are full of coins (which you love so dearly) not only through unholy alliances with foxy folks like the Herodians, but also by robbing believers by heavy temple-taxes!" Thus, the Pharisees get caught in a trap of their own making. By his pronouncement, Jesus is not appealing to any *'rights theory'* but to the *de facto* existence of Caesar's power on the basis of his coinage. Yet, he seems to indicate that there are structures of governance, which, though to be respected, must come under the overall sovereignty of God.

Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme of Conversion and Compassion

- Today's psalm (96) is one of the so-called *'enthronement psalms'*. Scholars hypothesize that there was an annual feast in which the king was enthroned in order to symbolize Yahweh's kingship over all. Thus, when the earthly king ascended the throne, all his subjects would have chanted this psalm and refrain: "Give the Lord glory and power!" for, God is king over both, heaven and earth, and his representatives, the kings, rule the earth in God's name. Once again, one sees expression of the supreme kingship of God.
- Paul's first Letter to the Thessalonians is the first written document of the whole New Testament—preceding even the gospels. During his 2nd missionary journey in the summer of the year 50 AD, Paul had converted many Jews and some Gentiles in Thessalonica (northern Greece), from where he journeyed onward to Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:1-10). Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers' "work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (v.3) and then reminds them that: "God has chosen you" (v.4). This can be seen in the perspective of God's choice and mission.

Message of Pope Francis for 'World Mission Sunday 2020': "Understanding what God is saying to us at this time of pandemic also represents a challenge for the Church's mission. The impossibility of gathering as a Church to celebrate the Eucharist has led us to share the experience of many Christian communities that cannot celebrate Mass every Sunday. In all of this, God's question: "Whom shall I send?" is addressed once more to us and awaits a generous and convincing response: "Here am I, send me!" (*Is* 6:8). God continues to look for those whom he can send forth into the world and to the nations to bear witness to his love, his deliverance from sin and death, his liberation from evil."

Contextual Concern: 'Stand for Stan': Jesuit priest Fr Stan Swamy was jailed last week on false charges of instigating violence in the Bhima-Koregaon case. Was this *'religious'* being too *'political'* in ensuring the rights of Jesus' least sisters and brothers: the Adivasis? Can one divorce the religious from the political ... or, for that matter, the social from the spiritual? Ultimately, *everything* and *everyone* belongs to God. Let's give back to God even what belongs to Caesar!
