

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Isaiah 45. 1,4-6)

I am the Lord; there is no other

This passage of Isaiah must have been written at the very end of the exile in Babylon, as Cyrus, King of Persia, was approaching to take over the city and decree that the captives, Jews and other nations, should be sent home to their own countries. In this, the Jews saw Cyrus as God's own envoy.

It must have finally confirmed them in the new understanding, reached by being sunk into the hostile and alien civilization of Babylon, that their God, the Lord, was God not just of Israel but of the whole world.

Before the exile, of course, they were convinced that the Lord was their own special God and protector, but what of other nations? Confronted with the alien and materialistic gods of Babylon, they realized that God, their own intimate and loving Lord, was the God not just of Israel but of the whole world, the whole universe, the creator of light and darkness. If no other lesson were learnt from the Exile, this was a major advance in understanding.

Do we have other gods to worship? Do we accept the Lord as key to every door in the universe, even the door of our own hearts?

Question:

Do I try to worship other gods as well as the Lord?

Second reading:

(1 Thessalonians 1.1-5)

The earliest of Paul's Letters

This Sunday we start reading First Thessalonians, the earliest of all Paul's letters. It is read for the next five Sundays.

Paul moved so rapidly round the new Christian communities that he founded he could never instruct them fully at the first founding. So Paul needed to keep in touch, answering questions, solving difficulties, showing his 'concern for all the Churches'.

They are real letters, each responding to a different set of circumstances. Each of Paul's letters begins with a warm greeting, 'grace and peace'. 'Grace' is God's affectionate and powerful smile, drawing us into God's loving protection, and empowering us to live and work for him. Then, with his thoughtful courtesy, Paul encourages them (where possible - the Galatians get no compliments, for they have let Paul down badly) with praise for their achievements in Christ.

Here he praises their faith, their love and their firm hope, and also the effectiveness in their lives of the power of the Spirit. It never does any harm to look for the best in people and show that their efforts have been recognized!

Question:

How do we go on learning more about our faith?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 22.15-21)

The Question of Taxes

They must really have thought they had their victim sewn up! If Jesus said he paid the Roman taxes, he recognized the Emperor, not God, as his Lord. If he said he did not pay, he was a traitor to Rome.

Jesus turns the question back on them. First, he makes them admit that they recognize Rome as overlord by carrying a Roman coin, for the coin would carry the Emperor's head. Next he puts to them a question: what do they consider is due to Caesar? Finally, he goes beyond their question, to interrogate their ultimate loyalty: in the last analysis, just what is due to God?

At a superficial level, this seems a little verbal tussle, in which Jesus outwits his opponents. But the story was remembered and passed on in the Christian community not because of Jesus' cleverness, but because, at a deeper level, it is a question that Jesus puts to each of us: just where do our loyalties and priorities lie? In money? Respect? Sex? Fame? A good holiday? Comfort? Power?

Jesus is not a dictator who imposes his will. He just asks the question and leaves us to give our own answer. To those who question him, he gives no easy answer, but always replies with another question.

Question:

Where do my priorities lie - in money, sex, power, fame, leisure?
