

Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As people of faith you and I are usually in the minority when it comes to taking a stand on some moral issue. As people of faith we often see things differently to the way others see them. We underestimate the gift that allows us to be able to search out and often find where God is at work in our lives and in our world.

When we read the Scriptures, we are not reading history books or articles on science. But we are reading the truths that have been discovered by people of faith. Today's first reading from the Prophet Isaiah is a remarkable reflection upon how God is able to use people of influence and power to bring about his will. The pagan king Cyrus is described as the anointed one of God. "It is for the sake of my servant Jacob, of Israel my chosen one that I have called you by your name, conferring a title though you do not know me." God's sovereignty over the world is expressed through the power of the Assyrian monarch. "I am the Lord unrivalled; though you do not know me, I arm you that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that, apart from me, all is nothing."

In the gospel, what was intended as a trap for Jesus becomes a moment when God makes clear who is in charge in our world. We are told that the Pharisees met together to find a way to catch Jesus out. They would

have been very confident that the controversy about paying the Roman Poll Tax, the census as it was called, would have provided them with a great opportunity to trap Jesus. If Jesus said no, the tax does not need to be paid, he would be in trouble with the Roman officials. If he said yes, it did have to be paid, then he would lose face with all those who objected to the Roman rule of their country. Jesus very cleverly asks for the coin that was used to pay the Poll Tax. It was a Denarius equivalent to a day's wages. The tax could only be paid in Roman coinage. The most common coin in the time of Jesus carried the head and the name of Tiberius Caesar. It even described him as being the "august son of the divine Augustus, high priest". That must have sounded like blasphemy to any faithful religious Jew. I think Jesus knew that quite well when he asked those who were holding the coin, "Whose head is this? Whose name? When they told him that the coin had Caesar's name on it, then he told them to give it back to the one to whom it belonged.

But what Jesus said next was most unexpected. "and give back to God what belongs to God." Jesus had something quite profound to say to all of us. Everything belongs to God. We are completely dependent upon God for all that we have and all that we are. To give back to God what belongs to God is to rededicate

ourselves to the God who loves us. It means to put our hope and our trust in the one who cares for us.

For the religious leaders who were trying to trap Jesus they had to realise that their authority to teach and to lead came from God. They were claiming to act in God's name, but were acting on their own authority. Jesus told them to give any authority and power they had claimed for themselves back to God.

When we realise that all we have comes from God, then we see the world around us differently. Prayers of thanks come much more easily to our lips because our hearts are singing songs of praise. We can give thanks even for things that we don't understand or wish for. We are given the freedom to use more generously the money and the material possessions that we usually claim to be our own.

We can be like those people of Thessalonica that Paul writes to today. "We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all, and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ." I would love to think that people can see us as people of faith who allow our faith to inform all that we do. Paul's expression, "to work for love" reminds us that it is the power of God's love for

us that moves us to love others. Paul talks also of persevering through hope. He reminds us that to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus can demand much of us. We can only persevere by looking beyond the difficulties of today and putting our hope in that full communion with God that awaits us. As people of hope we leave the future in God's hands, trusting that God will fulfil his promises to us.

During the last twelve months Pope Francis has been reflecting upon the virtue of Hope during his Wednesday General audiences. This week he spoke about death. He said that death is a reality that modern civilization tends more and more to set aside and not think about. But for us believers, death is actually a door and a call to live for something greater. Pope Francis invited us all to think about the moment of our death and imagine the time when Jesus will take us by the hand and say, "come, rise and come with me." In that moment he said, hope will end, and it will become reality.

Pope Francis highlights again for us what many others cannot see. As people of faith we can see something of what lies ahead for us. As people of hope we can look forward to the hidden reality that awaits us. As people of love we can live now the life that we will share with God forever.