

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2020

I ask for your prayers for peace of mind and peace of heart in the face of this upcoming election. There are fears of violence out there based on the results of the election. And that kind of fear is not what we are based on. Pray for the recognition of the right of all to vote, unencumbered and without fear, and that we all have the compassion to hear those who disagree with our own opinion and views.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Let's pray this together.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us now pray together the collect of the day.

The Collect

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

First Lesson

Isaiah 45:1-7

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him--
and the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,

the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the Lord do all these things.

The Response

Psalm 96:1-9, (10-13)

1 Sing to the Lord a new song; *
sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.
2 Sing to the Lord and bless his Name; *
proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.
3 Declare his glory among the nations *
and his wonders among all peoples.
4 For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; *
he is more to be feared than all gods.
5 As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; *
but it is the Lord who made the heavens.
6 Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! *
Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!
7 Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples; *
ascribe to the Lord honor and power.
8 Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; *
bring offerings and come into his courts.
9 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; *
let the whole earth tremble before him.
10 [Tell it out among the nations: "The Lord is King! *
he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it; *
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
12 Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy
before the Lord when he comes, *
when he comes to judge the earth.

13 He will judge the world with righteousness *
and the peoples with his truth.]

The Epistle

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

The Gospel

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.
Glory to you Lord Christ.

Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The Emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Praise to you Lord Christ.

A Reflection

May the words written and the prayer of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

In Daniel Defoe's 1726 work *The Political History of the Devil* we first hear the phrase, "Things as certain as *death and taxes*, can be more firmly believ'd." This is also later credited to Benjamin Franklin, but we are all familiar with the idea of the only two certain things in life are death and taxes. Rather a bleak outlook on life, in my opinion – without mention of love or the Love of the Lord, both things I believe are a constant in life, but we appear to be dealing with taxes today.

It is established at this point in the Gospels that the Pharisees and High Priests were conspiring against Jesus, as they feared the power he seemed to have over the people.

Today's Gospel shows an attempt to catch Jesus in some words of insurrection to the Roman leadership. They approach him with seemingly respectful words – the respect is, in my opinion, just bait for the trap they hope to catch him with. They offer, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

A verbal trap, no question. If Jesus says it is *not* lawful, they have him for teaching insurrection to Roman rule. If he says it *is* lawful, he will no longer be seen as a savior from Roman rule by the people. Jesus, however, can see what they are doing. He responds with, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"

But Jesus recognizes their trap. He continues in dialogue requesting, "Show me the coin used for the tax." With coin then in hand, he goes on to ask, (perhaps with a somewhat ironic tone), "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

The Pharisees answered, "The Emperor's."

As soon as they have answered, their trap for Jesus is thrown off, and Jesus has outmaneuvered them. The response Jesus offers is not only sharp rhetoric but also theology worth deep consideration today. He tells them, in response to their original question about taxes, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

No insurrection here! Just a clear statement about paying what is owed, and who received what is owed, and we must do what is required.

I will not devote much time here to the constant political debate about taxes, as that is not the primary point of the Gospel. I will point out that taxes, when handled and administered properly, are how we finance the gifts of our society. What are these gifts? Roads in good repair, well-trained police, firefighters, a good education system, but you know these gifts, we all benefit from them daily.

But what about the gifts of God? Do we not benefit from those on a regular basis? The gifts of love,

open hearts, compassion for each other, a beautiful sunset, or a smile, or, as we hear in Isaiah, "I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name." God has called us by name.

Where do you see the gifts of God?

But then Jesus says, "Give to God the things that are God's." There is no coin we can hold up that is an appropriate measure of God's worth. Maybe, instead of looking to a coin, we should look inward and see what is inscribed on our hearts. Do you find God inscribed there? Is your heart something you can offer as a sort of "tax" to God?

I'm not suggesting that God charges a tax for the gifts that are provided to us, as bountiful as those gifts often are, but how do we give to God the things that are God's? If God is in all things, what can we give that God doesn't already have?

In the abundance we have in our lives, I suggest that we give God what is God's when we share God's gifts with others.

When we take that time in the grocery store to pick up that little something extra for the food pantry – when we help others out on this bumpy path we are walking these days – when we offer help to any who are in need, then we are giving God what is God's. Quite often when we give these things, we receive the bonus of receiving also. The appreciation in the eyes, a thank you, dare I suggest even a hug (not these days, I know!) These are the gifts we receive in giving. Maybe this is a sort of rebate on the giving!

When we give from the heart, we are showing that God is inscribed there, and giving back to God what is God's already. Yes, give the Emperor that which is the Emperor's – but take the time to look at the inscription on your own heart, and give to God what is God's.

And always take the time to remember that you were God's already.

Amen.

Let us now confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Praying together:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.*

*For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Let us end by praying as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us – Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

We will continue with the prayer of Spiritual Communion. This prayer was written by St. Alphonsus de Liguori. This prayer is now often used when the church is in a place of fasting from Communion, and I have heard this used in many of the on-line services being offered. We will be using this prayer in place of Communion when we regather in the future.

Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. I love you above all things, and long for you in my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. As though you have already come, I embrace you and unite myself entirely to you; never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

You should have received a letter by now announcing our regathering on Sunday, October 25. I'll probably remind you of this a lot between now and then, but masks must be worn, without exception. We will be in separate pews, and maintaining appropriate distance from each other. As much as I look forward to seeing you, I also remind you, if you do not feel safe and comfortable, stay home, and we will pray for you that day. Join us in Spirit! I want everyone to stay safe, and I look forward to being with you to celebrate God's gifts in the world again!

Yours in Christ.
Dave+