

## 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday In Ordinary Time, Year A

### Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

*God used the armies of Babylon (modern day Iraq) to destroy Jerusalem and take the Israelites into exile as a punishment for their sins. Then, in turn, he used Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian empire (modern day Iran) in the sixth century before Christ, to destroy Babylon.<sup>5</sup> This ruler, whom Isaiah calls “the Shepherd of Yahweh”, permitted the Jews residing in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its temple.<sup>7</sup> Israel was probably chastened by the prospect of being led back home over the same route that their ancestor, Abraham, followed when he came out of Ur of the Chaldeans which was just a little southeast of Babylon! They probably got the idea that God was giving them another chance by His taking them back to an obvious place in Salvation History.<sup>1</sup>*

**1** Thus says the Lord to his anointed, Cyrus, This is the only place in the bible where a pagan ruler is called anointed! Cyrus’ kingdom was the largest of the then-known world. God chose Cyrus to be the instrument in his plan. Cyrus would allow God’s city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, and he would set the exiles free without expecting anything in return. There were very few kings of Israel or Judah that had done as much for God’s people as Cyrus.<sup>6</sup> The Catechism reminds us that God has absolute Lordship over history and the world.<sup>5</sup> (CCC 304) Sometimes we forget that each of us is anointed priest, prophet, and king through the sacrament of Baptism. We participate in these three offices of Christ and bear the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them.<sup>6</sup> **whose right hand I grasp**, In the Babylonian coronation ceremony, the king grasped the right hand of the god Bel-Marduk. Here Isaiah contrasts that with the concept of the TRUE GOD grasping the hand of Cyrus for the divine work of subduing nations and of inaugurating universal peace.<sup>4</sup> **subduing nations before him, and making kings run in his service, opening doors before him and leaving the gates unbarred:** Some say that Babylon had a hundred gates of bronze with posts and lintels of the same.<sup>14</sup>

**4** For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one, God had made a promise to Jacob on behalf of Israel that “the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants.” (Gen 28:13) The thing that marked Israel as distinct from all other peoples was her appreciation of a God who personally intervened in her hours of need and who promised to be always with his “Chosen People.”<sup>4</sup> **I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not.** Earthly kings are in the service of the one God, the only God, whether they realize it or not!<sup>8</sup>

**5** I am the Lord and there is no other, there is no God besides me. It is I who arm you, though you know me not, The most important theological claim of this reading is that God directs Cyrus to act on Israel’s behalf.<sup>12</sup> God is sovereign Lord with control over life from beginning to end; all that happens is under God’s control.<sup>13</sup> Cyrus was God’s instrument, even though he did not know God and was unaware of God’s plans.<sup>3</sup>

**6** so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun people may know that there is none besides me. I am the Lord, there is no other. The fact that God chose Cyrus to be instrumental in restoring the Israelites to their homeland was a tremendous show of God’s sovereignty over all people.<sup>6</sup>

## 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5b

*This may be the first book of the New Testament. St. Paul wrote it between 50-52 AD, some twenty years after the death of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> It begins as a note of congratulations on hearing a good report from his co-worker, Timothy, about the church in Thessalonica, the first Christian Church in Europe. He is obviously proud of his achievement in preaching to this young church, since they seem to have kept the faith.<sup>8</sup>*

**1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.** The address follows the style of Paul's time, naming the sender and the addressees and extending good wishes. In addition to St. Paul, this letter is also from Silvanus, also called Silas, who was a leading member of the Church of Jerusalem and a prophet who was sent to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to communicate the liberties granted the Gentile Christians by the Council of Jerusalem. He was then chosen by Paul to accompany him on his second journey and after that he accompanied Peter into northern Asia Minor. The third sender, Timothy, was Paul's most beloved friend and companion. He was from Lystra, the son of a Greek father and a Jewish Christian mother. He later became the bishop of Ephesus and was martyred in 97 AD.<sup>10</sup> Thessalonica was a major city in northern Greece. Because the congregation contained both Greek and Hebrew members, Paul began his letter with a greeting combining the Greek "grace" and the Hebrew "peace."<sup>7</sup>

**2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers.** As is typical of Paul's letters, there is a prayer of thanksgiving, but Paul thanks God for them as though God Himself had accomplished everything.<sup>15</sup>

**3 unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father,** Paul recalls the time he first spend with his readers. What stands out in his mind are the theological virtues that changed their lives: in faith they abandoned their idols and embraced the living God, in hope they endured suffering and expressed longing for the final salvation that Jesus will bring when he returns, and in love they served one another in generous and sacrificial ways.<sup>16</sup> The spiritual life of the Christian is based on the practice of the 3 Theological Virtues: faith, hope and charity. Faith here signifies the total and personal assent the believer gives to God and to his plan of salvation revealed in the gospel. Paul speaks of the "work of faith" for one must not only "keep the faith," but also live it and profess it and bear witness to it and spread it. As St. John Chrysostom teaches: "Belief and faith are proved by works —not by simply *saying* that one believes but by real actions, which are kept up and by a heart burning with love." The service of others for God's sake is a proof of charity. When we take a look at hope, we see a virtue which "enables one to endure adversity," according to St. Thomas. Hope keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of heaven and is, therefore, the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer.<sup>9</sup> This is the earliest mention in Christian writing of the three Theological Virtues.<sup>15</sup>

**4 knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God,** All men are "beloved by God" because all have received their existence from him and he has called them to "eternal good things" as St. Thomas puts it. Here Paul is speaking especially about those who have been given the preaching of the Gospel and Baptism and the other sacraments for they are an object of divine "choice." This "choice" is not the same as "salvation" but it is an initiative on God's part prior to the attainment of salvation. TO BE SAVED ONE MUST RESPOND TO THIS ACTION OF GOD.<sup>9</sup> **how you were chosen.**

<sup>5</sup>For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit This refers to miraculous actions and also to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the souls of those who heard Paul preach.<sup>9</sup> and with much conviction.

*In Pope Benedict XVI's message on Pentecost of 2008, he said: "Let us rediscover, dear brothers and sisters, the beauty of being baptized in the Holy Spirit; let us be aware again of our baptism and of our confirmation, sources of grace that are always present. Let us ask the Virgin Mary to obtain a renewed Pentecost for the Church again today, a Pentecost that will spread in everyone the joy of being and witnessing to the Gospel."*

### **Matthew 22:15-21**

*This passage shows us the relationship between faith life and civil life, and this problem is not restricted to the first century. The metaphor of the coin can stand for the many issues where Christians today might find a conflict between their citizenship and their Baptism, between what makes them a member of a nation and what makes them a member of the Church.<sup>17</sup> Paying taxes to the emperor of Rome was a real problem for the Pharisees and for all Jews living in a country occupied by the armies of Rome. Paying tribute to Caesar implied for the Jew that there was a sovereign other than God ruling over them. In Caesar's case it was even a sovereign who claimed divinity for himself.<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>15</sup>The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.

<sup>16</sup>They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, The Pharisees and their disciples were a religious sect of Jews whose aimed to keep the Mosaic Law in all of its strict interpretations. They kept aloof from the ordinary people. They were opposed to Christ from the beginning of his public preaching because he came to "call sinners" and he associated freely with them.<sup>6</sup> The "Herodians" were supporters of Roman rule and sympathetic to the leadership of Herod. The collaboration of the Pharisees and the Herodians who represented opposite political views, reveals the extreme measures taken to eliminate Jesus.<sup>11</sup> The only thing that united them was the cause of bringing down Jesus.<sup>15</sup> saying, "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you reach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status.

<sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" Their strategy was to trap Jesus: if he opposed the tax, the Herodians could charge him with treason for instigating a tax revolt against Rome. If Jesus approved of it, the Pharisees would charge him as unfaithful to Judaism and its hopes of national independence.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Knowing their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?

<sup>19</sup>Show me the coin that pays the census tax." Then they handed him the Roman coin.

<sup>20</sup>He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" The coin was a "denarius" stamped with a profile portrait of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor. This tax was especially offensive to the Jews, who believed that God forbade the fashioning of graven images in the likeness of any created thing.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>21</sup>They replied, "Caesar'." At that he said to them, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." The Catechism (2239-2240) says that it is the duty of citizens to contribute to the good of society. It is morally OBLIGATORY to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote and to defend one's country.<sup>5</sup> Romans 13:7 tells us to: "Pay to all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." In 1 Timothy 22 we are exhorted to offer prayers and thanksgiving for kings

(which would also apply to presidents) and all who exercise authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. However, the Catechism (CCC 2242) also says that the citizen is obliged in conscience NOT to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order. We must obey God rather than men.<sup>5</sup>

*Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) The Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (2) "The Jerome Scriptural Commentary," (3) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (4) "The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 40-66" by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (5) "The Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (6) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (7) "You Can Understand The Bible" by Peter Kreeft, (8) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers" by Aelred Rosser, (9) "The Navarre Bible: Thessalonians And Pastoral Epistles", (10) "Dictionary Of The Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (11) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (12) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A" by James L. Weaver, (13) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers Cycle A" by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, (14) "Smith's Bible Dictionary" by Dr. William Smith, (15) The St. Paul Center For Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (16) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letters of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, and (17) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A" by Martin Connell.*

*In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.*