

## HOMILY for 29<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel talks about tax and government; reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story I'd like to share with you.

A speech writer for President Bush felt unappreciated by the president, and so when the President came to give his next speech, he looked at the teleprompter & it said:

"Some say that this war against Iraq is all about oil. It isn't, & I'll tell you why."

"Some say that a tax cut will lead to even more federal deficits. It won't, & I'll tell you why."

"Some say that my policies favor the wealthy over the middle class. They don't, & I'll tell you why."

And then there was a blank space on the teleprompter. And then the words: "Okay, George, you take it from here."

Anyway, I don't know about you, but I'm always intrigued by this Sunday's Gospel passage because of its reference to the tax issue & how Jesus responded to it. In case you didn't hear it clearly yet, let me repeat it to you: "...The Pharisees sent their disciples to Jesus, accompanied by Herodian sympathizers, who said: 'Teacher, we know you are a truthful man & teach God's way in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?' Knowing their malice, Jesus said, 'Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.' Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, 'Whose image is this & whose inscription?' they replied, 'Caesar's.' At that point he said to them, 'Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.'"

I never thought that Jesus would engage with the world on the tax issue even though He knew that it was a trap. If He told the Jewish public not to pay tax, He would be in trouble with the Romans who occupied the land back then & demanded tax from their subjects. On the other hand, if He told the Jewish public to pay tax, his countrymen would hate him for that. So, Jesus was caught between the rock and a hard place. But, he managed to get out of that difficult situation & was still able to teach the public an important lesson about tax and their civic duties. We might think that Jesus could not say anything about tax and social responsibilities. He should stick with faith matter & spiritual world. That is how we often think. We assume that tax and social responsibilities do not have any spiritual value. We cannot see how Jesus could use secular issues to change the world. We do not realize that everything is possible with God. God could change the course of history & move people back home to God in a mysterious way.

In case we could not see that mysterious work of God in the world yet, let me give you a couple of examples to testify to it. The first example can be found in this Sunday's Gospel as Jesus examined a small Roman coin & said, "Then, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's." The Pharisees & their allies wanted to use the tax issue to trap Jesus & get him into trouble with the Romans & the Jewish public. But, Jesus was able to outsmart his enemies & turn mundane things like tax & social responsibilities into a great lesson about their relationship with God. He did not only tell the Jewish public to fulfill their social responsibilities but also call them to live up to their duties to God. They should not neglect their spiritual life & forget about their accountability to God. They should live up to God's Commandments & try to

love God with all their hearts & minds & love their neighbors as themselves. As we can see, Jesus was able to use our social responsibility of tax & his difficult situation with the Pharisees for a spiritual discussion & calling the Jewish public to come home to God.

However, that was not the first time we have seen God use mundane things like our social responsibility of tax to communicate about the spiritual world. In fact, throughout the history of God's people, we have learned how God had used foreign powers to carry out God's punishments & assist God's people after their repentance. Here is how this Sunday's First Reading shares with us about that secret work of God: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp, subduing nations before him, & making kings run in his service, opening doors before him & leaving gates unbarred: For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by name, given you a title though you knew me not... It is I who arm you, though you know me not..." In case you don't know, Cyrus is not a Jewish king, rather than a Persian king. After defeating the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire took over & Cyrus became its new king. But, unlike the last king, Cyrus was friendly to the Israelites & let them return home & rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem for their communal worship. They did not realize how much God had used foreign powers to do God's work & bring God's people much needed help without their notice. That is what prophet Isaiah tell us in this Sunday's First Reading.

Another example that I'd like to point out about God's secret work in the world is the birth of the official Christian Church. After the death & resurrection of Jesus, the Roman Empire considered the Christian Church as a cult. Then around the second century, a Roman Emperor named Constantine who attributed his victory on an important battle to a Christian symbol called Chi Rho (☩) being put on the shields of his army and then made the Christian Church the official religion to the entire Roman Empire. Who would have thought that an empire that killed the Christian Church's leader would make it the official religion for its entire kingdom two hundred years later? Similarly, Paul who persecuted the early Christian Church & killed lots of its members would convert to that religion & then risk his own life to testify for it & do its missionary work in future years. Who would know God would use a Christian Church's enemy like Paul to witness for it & promote it in the future? So, we got to pray for our Christian Church's enemies to convert and come home to Jesus, instead of condemning them.

My dear brothers & sisters, we know that God works in a mysterious way throughout our human history. This Sunday's readings give us examples & remind us of that divine work around the world. We usually cannot understand & see God's work in our lives & society. We need to be open to that mysterious work & pray for the conversion of the whole world every day instead of condemning it. When we do that, we might be able to open to God's mysterious work & see lots of divine miracles in our lives, maybe even in our world, in God's due time.