

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's plan and its fulfillment in human history. They also invite us to give to God what is due to him in the unfolding of human history.

The first reading describes how in a mysterious way Cyrus, a pagan monarch, became king over Babylon in order to set the people of Israel free. For Isaiah, it was God who chose Cyrus and handed him the power so that he may bring back the people of Israel to Jerusalem and helps them rebuild the temple.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is the master of history. He directs all the happenings of human history according to his plan. In the same way, he can use any means in his power, in terms of a person or an event, in order to achieve a good he wants for his beloved ones.

In that perspective, history is not neutral at all; it bears the imprint of God. There is, then, a relation between human power and God's design. However, such a relation should not lead us to make confusion between human history and God's history. That is why it is important to respect each entity by giving to God what is due to him and to Caesar what is his. Such is the proposal Jesus makes in today's Gospel.

In fact, in the Gospel, the Pharisees and the Herodians present Jesus with a very difficult problem to deal with, namely whether it was lawful or not to pay the census tax to Caesar. Given the social situation of Israel at that time as an occupied country, it was a true dilemma.

If Jesus would answer negatively, he would be accused of denying the authority of the emperor and, therefore, denounced by the Roman Empire as an inciter of people to civil disobedience. If, however, he would answer positively by inviting people to pay the tax to Caesar, he would be accused before the Jewish people of collaborating with the Roman power by denying the rights of the God of Israel. In those particular circumstances, it was obvious that whichever way Jesus would answer would always bring him trouble.

That is the reason why, by inviting his interlocutors to repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God", Jesus showed a lot of wisdom and prudence by not confusing God's domain with earthly domain. It was for him the only way to put an end to this embarrassing dilemma.

But, what did Jesus want to teach us with such an answer? First of all, Jesus wants to teach us something about our identity. In fact, every Christian has a double identity. On the one hand, we belong to the kingdom of God through our faith in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we are citizens of the country to which we belong and in which we live that faith. Anyone who denies this reality runs the risk of being blind and can easily fall into fanaticism.

Second, Jesus wants to teach us that because we have a double identity, we have parallel obligations. In fact, there are obligations we have to fulfill vis-à-vis the state by the fact that we are citizens of our country and there are obligations we have to fulfill vis-à-vis the Church, because of our faith in Jesus Christ.

In that perspective, to fulfill our social obligations and to acquit of our civil responsibilities makes us not only accountable before God, but it makes us also good citizens who give to Caesar what belongs to him. Here, Jesus himself is our model and our example. That is why anyone who uses his religion or his/her faith to deny his/her country what he/she owes to it is a bad Christian.

In the same way, we have obligations and duties toward God, and thereby, toward the Church. As we owe a lot to our government in terms of duties and obligations, we have the same demands when it is about God and the Church. We can never avoid fulfilling our religious duties and obligations for any reason whatsoever. To do so would mean the denial of God's rights on us as well as making ourselves bad citizens. That is why it is important to give to God what belongs to God.

The problem, however, is that when people do not fulfill their civil duties, like paying tax for instance, the State will apply fines and penalties. In that case, people feel compelled to act in order to avoid punishment. With God's matters, things do not work in the same way. The Church does not punish us because we do not contribute to the life of our community. On the contrary, the Church appeals to our conscience so that we come to understand that we have religious obligations we have to fulfill for the sake of our Church and the glory of God. Our conscience is very important in this matter.

Third, Jesus wants to teach us something about a balanced judgment. In fact, when Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay the tax to God or to Caesar, he did not jump on the question and just say: give it to God. On the contrary, he recognized the complexity of the situation and invited his interlocutors to give to God what was his and to Caesar what was his. We need that balanced judgment today more than ever. The fact that we are Christians does not mean necessarily that all the problems we have require a religious solution. Each problem requires its particular solution according to its nature, its size, and the circumstance.

That is what I call the principle of a balanced judgment. It does not mean that we have to sacrifice our faith or to dilute it. Rather, we have to make our faith work in a way that it guides us with lucidity, fairness and discernment. Here is a simple rule to apply: observe, analyze and act. Never act before analyzing and observing with discernment.

To come to such a balanced judgment is not always easy. We need to pray so that God may enlighten us with his Holy Spirit. We have to help each other, as St Paul was helped in his apostolic duty by Silvanus and Timothy. Let us work together for the growth of God's kingdom and let us give to God what is his, as we do with our country. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 45: 1, 4-6; 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5b; Matthew 22: 15-21



Homily Date: October 16, 2011

© 2011 – Fr Felicien I. Mbala, PhD, STD

Contact: www.mbala.org

Document Name: 20111016homily.pdf