

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year A)

October 16, 2011

(Isaiah 45: 1, 4-6; I Thessalonians 1: 1-5; Matthew 22: 15-21)

Introduction

A politician who was running for re-election gave a major speech in a big city. Afterwards he asked the reporters who were there not to publish his jokes because he wanted to use them again in a talk he was giving in another city the next day. That evening the local paper reported the speech in these words: “The candidate also told a number of jokes that we’re not allowed to print.” Politicians sometimes get a rough ride!

Today’s readings are about politicians, but in both of them politicians are presented in a positive light. The Old Testament reading is a hopeful message from Isaiah. The Israelites had been held captive in Babylon for so long a time they had almost despaired of ever getting home again. Then in 539 B.C., a Persian king named Cyrus conquered Babylon. He promptly agreed to let the Israelites return to their own country. Isaiah speaks of Cyrus as a politician who, without realizing it, is serving as an instrument to accomplish God’s will for his people. He even refers to Cyrus as the Lord’s “anointed”.

The Gospel shows Jesus being asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to the Romans who had invaded Israel and were occupying it. This was a highly dangerous question, carefully stage-managed to put Jesus on the spot in a very public place. If Jesus answered yes, the fundamentalists, who found the Roman presence in their country blasphemous, would be ready to assassinate him. If he said no, the Romans would be ready to arrest him, and put him to death for treason. Either way, it looked as if Jesus was a dead man. Jesus’ answer, to give to God what belongs to God and to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, represents a positive attitude towards the authorities. It shows us, as Isaiah did in that first reading, that even foreign politicians can be instruments to accomplish God’s purposes.

A Modern Application

Both readings then say something positive about politics. We have all experienced elections that are bitterly-fought with negative advertising. As a result, we may be feeling cynical or distrustful of politicians. So this is a good time for us to hear this positive message. Catholic social teaching speaks in general of politics as a noble profession and one that can be a means of demonstrating genuine love and concern for other people.

In fact in one of the most famous Catholic social documents, Pope Pius XI insisted that, to solve the problems of our society and to help bring about a better world, two things are needed, the reform of persons and the reform of social institutions. The reform of persons, obviously, is primarily the work of religion; the reform of social institutions is primarily the work of politics. We need both. In a way this even reflects Our Lord’s answer, to give the emperor the things that belong to the emperor and to God the things that belong to God. Let me take a brief look then at each of these, the reform of persons and the reform of social institutions.

The Reform of Persons

It is certain that nothing will get better without personal conversion. A good world first and foremost requires good people. That means that our religion, dealing as it does

with our relationship to God, is the most important element in our life, because only the grace of God can transform us and make us better people. Perhaps one of the reasons why people so often speak cynically about politicians is because they are expecting them to accomplish what only religion and the grace of God can do, and that is unfair. The best political system in the world and the finest laws we can create, won't bring about a good society if people are not trying to live a good life, one that reflects a genuine love for God and an effective love for their neighbour.

The Reform of Social Institutions.

Why isn't it enough, then, just for everybody to try to be a good person? It is because in many situations we won't be able to treat other people fairly if there aren't good laws and good social programs in place. For example, if we don't insist that our lawmakers set up and enforce proper safety standards for foods, medicines, automobiles, then our neighbours won't have the protection they need and they will come to harm as a result. Again, if we don't demand that our legislators raise the necessary taxes so we can have universal health care, accessible education, low cost housing and decent levels of social assistance, then our good will toward others will not by itself do much for people in serious need. What we have to do for others, if we truly believe in love of neighbour, is often something we can't do unless we elect the lawmakers and pay the taxes that will put the needed social programs into place. So we need religion but we also need politics.

Conclusion

Some of you may have heard the story of the person trapped on the roof of his house during a flood. He prayed for God to rescue him. Someone came along with a rowboat to pick him up but he refused, saying God was going to rescue him. Then someone else came with a helicopter and again he refused help saying God would rescue him. As the water was just about to cover him he called out: "Lord, why didn't you help when I asked?" The Lord said: "I did. I sent you a boat and then a helicopter and you turned them both down." Only God can change hearts, but God also uses other people, like politicians, to help us serve our neighbour as we should.