

HOMILY SUN 29-A (Homily 02)

“Faith, Hope and Love – the Litmus Test of Genuine Religion”

(Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b; Matthew 22:15-21)

We always give thanks to God for all of you, and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before God our Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Those words of St. Paul about the Thessalonians reveal that faith, hope and love are the litmus test of genuine religion.

There are really two tests in the Gospel today. The Jewish leaders set out to test Jesus, to entrap him, but end up being tested by Jesus and found wanting. That scenario, however, is rooted in the Old Testament.

We learn from Isaiah in the first reading that Cyrus was a pagan king who *did not know the God of Israel*. God nevertheless armed this pagan king and used him to chastise the Israelites, to humble them, to get through to them, as a last resort to penetrate their false pride and stubborn selfishness and to lead them onto the right path to newness of life.

In the gospel, that stubborn pride of the Israelites of old becomes localized in the Pharisees and the Herodians who conspire to discredit Jesus, to entrap him. Herod was a puppet king, an inept ruler imposed on the Israelites by the Romans. Aware of his illegitimacy, he attempted to justify his reign by building up his little empire. His plan was to refurbish the Temple to his own glory, so he taxed the people, including the poor, in collaboration with the Romans who stood to gain from his machinations.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were complicit with Herod in his schemes, all with vested interests in their own selfish ends and personal gain. Jesus was a Mosaic prophet, not a Temple prophet, and so not tied in with the economic system that the religious leaders had developed to serve their own interests. They were suspicious, therefore, of Jesus, and afraid that he might upset their cozy set-up with the Romans. So naturally, they had to test him, to see where he stood on their system of taxation. It was more about economics and cold hard cash, than about worshipping the true God.

True to his nature, Jesus outwitted them, by their own means. Carrying a Roman coin at that time for the orthodox Jew was tantamount to idolatry because of the image of Caesar on it. Jesus did not have such a coin, but his opponents, the Pharisees and Herodians, were able to produce one, revealing their hypocrisy.

On top of all that, their greatest sin was their refusal to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. In the end, their real god was money, prestige and power, the three temptations that Jesus faced and rejected in the desert at the beginning of his ministry, making him the new Israel. Their hypocrisy, duplicity, complicity with the Romans and lack of faith in him was almost too much for Jesus to stomach; no wonder he called them hypocrites.

His answer to their question, which pierced through their hypocrisy, was to ask them for a coin used to pay the taxes, have them identify the idolatrous image they were carrying and then succinctly tell them to give to Caesar what is his, and to God what is God's. That action should have been their acceptance of Jesus, their hope in his promises and their love for the poor – the very things they resisted.

What a contrast to the second reading! The Thessalonians are the complete opposite of the Pharisees and Herodians in the gospel. As God used a pagan king in the first reading to humble the proud Israelites, it is as if the liturgists who chose the readings for this Sunday used the Thessalonians to remind us of the humility the Jews at the time of St. Paul needed to develop. The Thessalonians work of faith, their labour of love and their steadfast hope, all rooted in Jesus Christ, shows that they are the new people of God and a source of gratitude for Paul, unlike the Pharisees and Herodians who were a source of frustration for Jesus.

We are left with the insight that faith in Jesus, hope in his promise and love for others, are the litmus test of genuine religion. The Pharisees and the Herodians put their faith not in Jesus but in power and prestige, all in the name of religion, which made them so devious. Their hope was grounded not on the promises of Jesus, but on political gain and finding favour with the Roman government. Their love was not really for God and certainly not for Jesus, but for money and possessions. No wonder Jesus had such a struggle with them throughout the Gospels. The very religious leaders who should have been the first to recognize him, to accept him and to follow him, were the very ones who resisted him to the bitter end, engineering his crucifixion on the cross.

Thank God for the Thessalonians, and all the other gentiles who were open to the Word of God and the Good News preached by Paul and the other disciples of Jesus

after his death and resurrection. They are the true living stones making up the Church that Jesus founded on the faith of the apostles. We, their descendants in faith, are now the ones called to respond to the Word of Jesus as did the Thessalonians, with faith, hope and love.

It is obvious that the attitude of the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day needed healing. Ironically, a worldwide survey apparently conducted by the UN, speaks of the need for healing of similar attitudes in our world today. The only question asked on this survey was: "Would you please give your honest opinion about solutions to the food shortage in the rest of the world." The survey was a huge failure, because ... in Africa they didn't know what 'food' meant; in Eastern Europe they didn't know what 'honest' meant; in Western Europe they didn't know what 'shortage' meant; in China they didn't know what 'opinion' meant; in the Middle East they didn't know what 'solution' meant; in South America they didn't know what 'please' meant, and in the United States they didn't know what 'the rest of the world' meant.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is an act of faith in Jesus, a testament of hope in his promises, and a commitment to love others as Jesus has loved us.

So remember, faith in Jesus Christ, hope in his promises, and genuine love for others, is the litmus test of genuine religion.