

Homily 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A 22nd October 2017

Today's readings ask the simple question: Who or what is your God? It's a question that all people irrespective of religious beliefs or not are compelled to ask. Why? Because; knowing truthfully who or what our God is tells us where our heart lies. Our God will hold the keys to our heart. As I have said to you many times St Benedict in the prologue to his Rule encourages his nuns and monks to: "Listen with the ear of the heart". So one way of discerning who your God is, is to examine what speaks to your heart. The simple question: "What speaks to my heart?" While it may be uncomfortable to answer truthfully, this simple question will break open who we really are and what motivates us.

In the first reading Isaiah introduces Cyrus. Now Cyrus is an interesting character. He was the Persian King who captured Babylon while the people of Israel were being held in exile in that city. Cyrus was a gentile which is why the Lord says "you do not know me". However as King of Babylon Cyrus was commissioned the Lord to release His people Israel from exile and rebuild the Temple. At their coronation Babylonian Kings clasped the hand of

their patron God, which is why Isaiah says: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus whom he has taken by his right hand”. Cyrus was the leader of the Persian Empire the superpower of their day. Cyrus’ anointing by the God to lead Israel out of captivity clearly shows how God uses civil powers in His redemptive plan. While it’s difficult to say who or what was Cyrus’ God, as it is record in ancient texts that he released the people of Israel in the name of the Babylonian God’s. He did respect the customs and religions of his subjects.

While it may be unclear what spoke to the heart of Cyrus it is very clear what spoke to the heart of the Pharisees and Herodians in Mathew’s Gospel. Pharisees and Herodians were only interested in one thing, power! Be it religious or civil power. The Pharisees’ whole world centred on the Temple, they controlled the Temple and their wealth and power flowed from the Temple. The Pharisees power base was derived from their pre-eminence in the religious hierarchy of the day. The Pharisees cared deeply about a man’s rank as that was the basis of their power and they were more concerned about teaching the Law than God’s way. The Law reinforced their power and much of their wealth was derived from corrupt practices in Temple worship,

particularly what was referred to as the Temple Tax. The Pharisees were far from being honest men. To add 'insult to injury' the question they put to Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar would have been a genuine question of conscience for a devout Jew. To pay taxes to Caesar meant the acknowledgement of a pagan foreign power's sovereignty over God's chosen people Israel so taxation was a hot topic in Jesus' Israel.

In contrast to the Pharisees the Herodians, were just plain thugs, supporting the Herodian dynasty which ruled at the bequest of the Roman occupying forces. Basically if they kept the population under control the Herodians could do what they pleased which included taxing the population. The Herodians were constantly on the lookout for Jewish troublemakers 'prophets' who could command a large crowd and potentially cause trouble for the Romans, this is the reason they executed John the Baptist. No doubt the Herodians had Jesus marked as a potential trouble maker.

When the agents of Pharisees and Herodians question Jesus about the paying of taxes to the Romans, Jesus exploded with indignation calling them hypocrites. What enraged Jesus was these very men who

mercilessly taxed and exploited the poor were trying to entrap Jesus over paying taxes to Rome. Jesus' reaction to the Pharisees and Herodians is seen by biblical commentators as the basis of Jesus' preferential option for the poor. It is very clear who speaks to the heart of Jesus the poor and the marginalised, those of the edge of society, those who are so often are the victims of injustice.

I like most people like to think I'm motivated by high ideals but a conversation with an old friend really challenged me. We are both Benedictine Oblates belonging to the World Community for Christian Meditation. Our Community is trying to raise funds to build a contemplative and meditation retreat centre on the site of a 13th century Abbey at Bonnevaux in France. Now Paul is a semi-retired orthodontist who for a number of years has been working on an initiative technique to straighten teeth in young children. Recently Paul was treating the child of a dentist who recognised the investment potential in Paul's work and offered to help him commercialise it. Paul's work has raised industry interest with one manufacturer offering him a considerable sum of money for his patents. Over coffee Paul explained to me that he is far from

convinced about the value of his work but if something does come out of it he would like to donate the royalties to building the international meditation centre. I sat there challenged by Paul's remarks, the question I immediately asked myself was: How would I react if I had a sudden windfall of say a million dollars? Would my reaction be as immediate and as generous as Paul's? My wife Kaye is in a lotto syndicate at our local Vinnies where she volunteers and like most people we fantasise about what we would do with our winnings; travel, help the kids, charity etc. But what troubled me when talking with Paul is would I be that generous? When I asked Paul about using his story, I think he was slightly embarrassed, he said: But I'm well off I've got all I need. I pointed out to Paul that many people in his position would simply want more. Knowing he has enough points to a person whose God is not wealth.

My conversation with my friend Paul and my reflection on today's readings has raised many questions for me. Am I like Cyrus, a person who does the will of God, but largely out of self-interest? Am I like the Pharisees and Herodians, seeking to justify what I'm doing under a cloak of self-righteousness? Or, does my heart listen to the poor and the marginalised? Who is my God?