



**29<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY A 2008      OCTOBER 19, 2008**

**FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.**

**ISAIAH 45:1, 4-5    1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-5B**

**MATTHEW 22:15-21**

I find that I pay little attention to the coins that seem to come and go into and out of my pocket anymore. For the most part nickels, dimes, and quarters have gone the way of the penny, having little or no buying power these days. But that was not always the case; coins used to be what I earned per hour when I first got a job in high school. I used to have to wear a tie to school, and my job was suppose to pay for most of my clothing, and I could buy a tie for seventy-nine cents or two for a dollar fifty at Tru-Fit on Eastern Avenue. But, that seventy-nine cents was just four pennies more than the three quarters, the seventy-five cents an hour (before taxes) that I earned stocking shelves at work. The face of George Washington on a coin meant a great deal more to me then when I gazed at his handsome Roman profile, and I have to say in those days I even valued the portraits of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Roosevelt which I don't pay much attention to today unless I find them on paper.

Regardless of their buying power, coins today, as they did thousands of years ago, tell us something about the time and the society in which we live. All those presidents on our coins tell us something about our country and its history, just as the images found on the coins of the ancient Greece and Rome. Greek coins not only portrayed their great leaders like Alexander the Great, but also their gods like Hermes or Athena. Similarly with the Romans. Jewish coins, however, unless minted by one of the kings like Herod who closely collaborated with the Romans, never bore a human image. Jewish coins may have had images of the Temple or of grapes or other symbols; pious Jews of Jesus' time never use a Roman coin if they could possibly help it. The head or census tax, however, had to be paid in a Roman denarius, and it bore the head of the emperor, the infamous Tiberius with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus."

In today's Gospel the arrest and passion of Jesus is drawing near. He has already cleansed the Temple, and all of the religious authorities are anxious to rid themselves of Him. And so the disciples of the Pharisees, in league with their enemies the Herodians, try to trick Jesus. The "head" or "census" tax like all taxes imposed by the Romans was strongly opposed by the people. To suggest that it was right to pay the tax would alienate the crowds; to suggest it was wrong would make Jesus an enemy of Rome. Their question, "Is it lawful to pay the

census tax to Caesar or not?” was one which caused serious conflicts among the Jews at that time, and Jesus seems damned no matter what His reply. With the wisdom of Solomon Jesus escapes their trap. “Whose image is on this and whose inscription?” “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” There is much more here for us, however, than simply admiring the nimbleness of Jesus’ mind. First of all, Jesus is not suggesting what we call the “separation of Church and state.” While we have, as a nation, sanctified this concept, the very idea of the Church and the state as two circles of influence that in no way intersects is obviously false. We know how often matters of faith and the power and laws of the state come into conflict. War, abortion, capital punishment are only a few of the hot issues where we find such conflicts. Today those conflicts seem magnified much more than in the past and in truth, whether we are aware of it or not, we find ourselves facing the conflict between faith and the state frequently.

We are for the most part, at least in theory, people of the law. If the law imposed by civil government states something we obey. And so if the law says fetal stem cell research is lawful, we tend to agree. If the law says that a war is lawful, we tend to agree. We could go on and on here, but what we fail to see is that there are laws of the past which are unlawful today. Segregation was once the way of the law, but today it is the contrary. What is moral and what is lawful are often in total opposition, and morality is the realm not of civil law but of the law of God. When the two come into opposition which are we to follow? It is not a question whose answer we should have to think about too long. Compared to the number of laws that are produced by our local and national legislatures, or the laws found in the Pentateuch, or those of Canon Law, God has made things quite simple for us, Ten Commandments. It is by them that all other man-made laws should be judged. It is God’s word and not even the latest decision of the Supreme Court that should determine what is right and what is wrong in terms of morality.

In our reading from Isaiah this morning speaks of Cyrus, the king of Persia as being anointed by Yahweh to do Yahweh’s will and frees his people from the slavery of Babylon. In the course of this poem two things are made obvious. Yahweh is the God: the only God. There are no others. And, Yahweh is the Lord of all history. Everyone and everything, even the secular world and its powerful men and women, are in His scope. He it is, and not those people of secular and worldly power, Who is to be obeyed.

As a person I am as about as political as you can get. I simply hate politics and therefore hate election years. I sometimes wish that I could simply press the mute button and

banish all the rhetoric and lies that seem to sprout every four years more than they do the rest of the time. Believe me, there is no candidate this year or any year, and no party this year or any year that could pass the litmus test of comparing their words or their platforms to God's words in the Ten Commandments. Yet, every year we as Christians are supposed to fulfill our obligation as citizens and cast our votes. There has been many a year when my own preference was to cast a vote for none of the above, but unfortunately our system will not allow me to do so. Although, if we were allowed to do so, our two parties might begin to get the message. As a result, going to the polls on Election Day often becomes not an arduous civic duty but a difficult exercise in prayerful discernment.

It seems that is exactly what voting should be—prayerful discernment. In our Gospel today, Jesus says that the image of Caesar on the coin determines to whom the coin should go. If we follow out that metaphor, then we as men and women who are created in the image of God bear His stamp, His image upon us. As such we belong to Him, and therefore all we do should be directed towards fulfilling God's will not only in the realm of the spiritual, but also in the secular realm.

We are required by our beliefs to take the obligation of voting not merely as a civil duty but as a spiritual duty. This means that we must take the time to listen and truly try to discern what candidates are saying and what they truly stand for. It means that we must look carefully at the party platforms which should tell us something about what those candidates stand for, and about what they plan to accomplish in the next four years. And then we must pray. I can't emphasize that enough. We must pray for the ability to use our own intelligence and the guidance of the Church on some of those "hot" issues to discern who will best conform to God's will as we see His Will not only in His Commandments, but also in the words and actions of His Son as He walked this earth.

Being a citizen of this country at this time in history is not easy. We have to cull the truth from the spin and the lies that are part of every political campaign. We have to weigh the value of one position against that of another, and sometimes we have to be content to vote against someone rather than for someone. Refusing to vote, which might actually be my preference, is simply a luxury that as a people we cannot afford.

More and more it seems to me that we cannot simply vote blindly for a man or woman because he or she is a Republican or a Democrat. The time for such old allegiances is long past and the stakes are far too high.

**We must give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God. But, make no mistake they are not mutually exclusive, and when they overlap, whose right to your mind and heart will you uphold? Before you answer, before you vote, spend some time with the Lord in prayer, and consider who will be like Cyrus, the king of the Persians, who will work to fulfill the will of God. May God help us all.**