

Homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Oct. 17-18, 2020

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

Preacher: Gloria Ulterino

Not to belabor the obvious, but: It's election time! And today's readings are exactly the ones we hear every 12 years just prior to a presidential election, (where the three-year liturgical cycle intersects with the four-year election cycle). We know them well. Jesus is near the end of his life on this earth. He's discovered enemies among many religious leaders. They're out to trap him. For he doesn't fit their often narrow dictates. Where are his loyalties? To God or to Caesar? Should they pay the census tax ... or not? His response? Whose image is on the coin? Caesar's.

Well, then, give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. His reply, of course, leaves them—and us—with more questions than answers, the primary ones being these. What *does* belong to God? And in this election year, what *does* belong to Caesar, to the “rulers” about to be elected?

Again, not to belabor the obvious, this election year is vastly different from any in recent – or not so recent – memory. The other night on the news we were taken to Maine. To worried folks. Another beautiful summer had been marked with so few visitors. How can these people pay their rent? Can they possibly survive another few months? We know the story well: the pandemic greedily spreading its grasp over the entire world. Uprooting our certainties. Making all too real our genuine connections to folks in Wuhan ... or Baghdad ... or Rochester, New York. How will our upside down world become a source of choosing wisely and well in this so important election? What might Jesus say to us today about all this?

As it turns out, we have the very real assistance of Pope Francis this year, in his brand new encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” (“Brothers and Sisters All”). Centered on the story of the Good Samaritan, the Pope invites us to plunge way below our mind, into our heart and guts. Who are *we* in this story? How might *we* become the Good Neighbor? Why *must* we become the Good Neighbor? In this divided and divisive world, this “throwaway” world,

the Pope insists: we *must* say no to bigotry, bullying, and walls of any kind. No to racism, to any system that sows fear and mistrust, no to the “attacks on digital media.” No to “them and those.” But yes to “us.” Always yes to us. Yes to the culture of encounter, to building bridges. To the “blessed awareness that we are part of one another.” He simply (or not so simply) asks each of us: “will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others?”

In answer to these questions and more, Pope Francis—inspired by Francis of Assisi—becomes very specific. He devotes chapter five to creating “A Better Kind of Politics,” one that is truly at the service of the common good (#154-197). This will not be easy for us, as he knows all too well. It’s slow, tough work that *must* be done if we are all to thrive, let alone survive. How will it be possible? The Pope is very specific. This is dignified work, open-ended and dynamic, welcoming differences rather than pushing them away. Charity, genuine love, and concern for all others are essential. We *need* good politics: “true statecraft,” far-sighted and healthy, which upholds “high principles and thinks of the long-term common good,” committed to the truth (#178). We *must* build bridges, search for solutions, and dialogue with others (both speak and listen) in order to understand.

In short, politicians are people “called to practice love in their daily interpersonal relationships” (#193). Pope Francis even proposes (in #197) the following examination of conscience for politicians. Why am I doing this? What is my real aim? What did I do for the progress of our people? What mark did I leave on the life of society? What real bonds did I create? What positive forces did I unleash? How much social peace did I sow? What good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me?

As we prepare to enter the voting booth, or send in our mail-in ballots, can we enter into our own examination of conscience? Can we imagine the answers of those running for president and other high offices, based upon their actions over many years? Does this sound unrealistic? Or, can we see that Pope Francis is urging us to consider in the most sincere and genuine terms how our vote can affect all people around this tiny globe we call home? By casting our vote, can we become the Good Neighbor to everyone on this earthly home?

It's often been said in the media that this election might well be the most important in our lifetimes. As people of faith, we must choose wisely and well. For those of us who follow Jesus, what whispers do we hear in our ears and in our hearts? What, indeed, belongs to Caesar? And what belongs to God? It's election time: the choice is ours to make.