

The Lectionary readings for today turn trying to please God into pleasing self. This is the opposite of trying to please self in pleasing God. In other words, the Faithful should ensure that God is at the pinnacle of everything they desire. The focus on God reduces stress caused by the unknown and offers courage to face life at whatever arises. A focus on God takes self-discipline to bring order out of confusing stress.

The Second-Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 Lectionary readings are about the self-discipline required for courage in the face of uncertainty. According to Isaiah, the Jews are in Exile in order to gain the self-discipline required both to return to their God and to return to their Holy Land. While in Exile, their return is most uncertain, yet the prophets (First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and others) offer encouragement. Isaiah 45:1 prophecies what God will do is scary. Isaiah prophecies that God will use Cyrus, the gentile king, to do what God wants, namely to free Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Read carefully, Second Isaiah 45:5 proclaims that there is no God *beside* God,<sup>2</sup> despite the Lectionary translation of *besides* God. Isaiah 45:4 says that Cyrus, the king, does not know God. That notwithstanding, God will use Cyrus. This means that if the Faithful will worship God in their hearts, God, who is ultimately in charge of everything, will encourage the Faithful with his very presence.

Psalms 96:10, dating back to the monarchial period,<sup>3</sup> before the Exile, proclaims that God is present as the real king of Israel. God sent the Israelites into Exile for neglecting that aspect of their religion. First Isaiah warned that Exile would happen. Accepting the divine order of creation, means rejecting the disorder of the devil. Such acceptance of divine order at the core of the soul is scary against whatever one anticipates for the future.

Tying to readjust the present order into something more just and God-centered can cause considerable stress. The life of Jesus and the Saints always reveals such stress. Political frustrations, however, spotlight grace in trying times. Sometimes the given order simply has to be accepted.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Clifford, S.J., "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1993 ) 11, 13, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Clifford, S.J., "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1993 ) 14.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. M. Roberts, "The Enthronement of Yhwh and David: The Abiding Theological Significance of the Kingship Language of the Psalms," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2002) 677, 679, 680.

Personal Notes  
051016 Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time 145A  
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The great administrator, Saint John Chrysostom (354-407), Patriarch of Constantinople, recognizes the need for order when he writes, "Do not say to me that some have misused this power, look rather at the good of the established order, and you will see how great is His wisdom who established these things from the beginning."<sup>4</sup>

For an earlier administrator, Saint Paul, right order meant justification through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the shadowy spirit of the world wherein one loses one's way in the priorities of life. The Holy Spirit enlightens the soul to justification before the Lord.

The acceptance of the Holy Spirit by the Thessalonians in the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians is the earliest part of the New Testament; written before 60 A.D.<sup>5</sup> Paul is thrilled beyond expectation. The Greek Paul uses at 1 Thessalonians 5:2, about *giving thanks* for the Thessalonians, is the same *thanks* preserved in the English word *Eucharist*. By his language, Paul identifies the Thessalonians with the Eucharist and the Faithful with courage for the future.

In the manner of the orators of his day,<sup>6</sup> Paul insists that his presentation does not do justice to the conviction of his message. Overwhelmed by what Holy Spirit (as distinct from *the* Holy Spirit) is doing in Thessalonica, Paul feels so good, he has no reason to vent any of his fears through anger. 1 Thessalonians 5:3 is another of the many places (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; Gal 5:5-6; Rom 5:1-5; Col 1:4-5; Eph 4:2-5; Heb 6:10-12; 10:22-24) Paul triumphs Faith, Hope, and Charity, *your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope*. This threefold linkage may antedate Paul.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Bishop and Doctor, *Let Every soul be Subject to Higher Powers,* PG 17, *Commentaria in Ep. Ad Romanos,*, Ch XIII, 1-7 in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading and Meditation: Volume Four: From the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost to the Twenty-fourth and Last Sunday after Pentecost, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 302, 304.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Corley, "The Pauline Authorship of 1 Corinthians 13," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 2 (April 2004) 271.

<sup>6</sup> Richard A. Horsley, "Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom in Corinth," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 39, No. 2 (April 1977) 230.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Corley, "The Pauline Authorship of 1 Corinthians 13," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 2 (April 2004) 261, 271.

While the Lectionary translation is *the* Holy Spirit, the original Greek omits the article, *the*. This seems to mean that Paul writes not about the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, but of the activity of the Holy Spirit. Paul means he experienced a certain divine inspiration preaching, placing his preaching as part of the power and conviction mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 1:5.<sup>8</sup> The Holy Spirit is foundational to Pauline theology.<sup>9</sup>

At 1 Thessalonians 5:3, Paul recognizes the need for obedience to the Father, not in the sense of an abusive Father, but in the sense of *your wish is my command*. Carrying out the wish of someone who is loved can demand self-discipline, but in the sense of the little boy carrying his brother into Father Flanagan's Boys' Town, insisting to the priest, *He ain't heavy Father, he's my brother*. The knack is to accept, rather than reject, the hurt, by locking onto the order that arises from the order God places on all things. In this way, pleasing God, pleases self.

Jesus recognizes the authority of the state at Matthew 22:21, *Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*. Jesus presents this civil authority as ultimately arising from God the Father. The notion, *your wish is my command*, is a particularly feminist understanding of obedience to the Father recognized in fellow human beings.<sup>10</sup>

In the Gospel of Matthew 22:15-21, Matthew 22:16 first lumps the angry religious leaders with the Roman Herodians.<sup>11</sup> Jesus recognizes evil in such religious leadership, referring to these leaders as hypocrites,<sup>12</sup> that is, actors pretending to

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<sup>8</sup> Maximilian Zerwick, S.J., English Edition adapted from the Fourth Latin Edition by Joseph Smith, S.J., Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblico—114—Biblical Greek (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1994) 58.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Plevnik, S.J., "The Understanding of God at the Basis of Pauline Theology," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4 (October 2003) 566.563-564.

<sup>10</sup> Kilian McConnell, O.S.B., "Feminist Mariologies: Heteronomy/Subordination and the Scandal of Christology," Theological Studies, Vol. 66, No. 3 (September 2005) 535.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Developing Conflict between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew's Gospel: a Literary-Critical Study," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 49, No. 1 (January 1987) 58.

<sup>12</sup> Louise Joy Lawrence, "'For truly, I tell you, they have received their reward' (Matt 6:2): Investigating Honor Precedence and honor Virtue," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2002) 700.

love God. Chrysostom observes “the first pretence [sic] of hypocrites: to praise those they desire to ruin.”<sup>13</sup> In this, Jesus is showing the Faithful how to deal with stressful frustrations and fear that trigger anger. Jesus is not accepting suffering in an inherently foolish manner. Rather, he is accepting suffering as something that will help the Faithful focus on God.

What follows seems a little forced, because I am not bringing it together as much as I would like. The deficiency is mine. The purpose of these Notes is to annotate the bibliography-index on the web site. For that reason, bear with the disconnect.

As was the custom of his day,<sup>14</sup> Jesus makes himself vulnerable by engaging in dialog with his adversaries. Such vulnerability is an offer of friendship, which, if rejected, can rebound with dreadful consequences for both parties. That is what happened.

Angry religious leaders asked Jesus a trick question, to which he offered an ambiguous answer,<sup>15</sup> *Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.* (For older folks, *then they handed him the Roman coin*, brings to mind the *denarius* of the earlier translation.) The trick question had received a trick answer. As Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in Africa (354-430) words it, “their [the religious leaders’] teeth had been crushed in pieces in their mouth.”<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Chrysostom in “Exposition from the Catena Aurea,” in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading and Meditation: Volume Four: From the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost to the Twenty-fourth and Last Sunday after Pentecost, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 294.

<sup>14</sup> Wendell E. Langley, S.J., “The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) against Its Semitic and Rabbinic Backdrop,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 67, No 2 (April 2005) 242.

<sup>15</sup> Terence L. Donaldson, “The Law That Hangs (Matthew 22:40): Rabbinic Formulation and Matthean Social World,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 57, No. 4 (October 1995) 695.

<sup>16</sup> III. St. Augustine, Bishop and Doctor, *The Teeth of the Pharisees*, PL 36, col. 682, par. 11, *In Psalmum* lvii. 7. in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading and Meditation: Volume Four: From the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost to the Twenty-fourth and Last Sunday after Pentecost, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 304

Personal Notes  
051016 Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time 145A  
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backlash was severe because, eventually these angry religious leaders, pretending to love God, executed Jesus.

The religious leaders who executed Jesus exhibited a self-assurance comparable to the self-assurance of later religious leaders who condemned Galileo or looked askance at the Black and other such Apostolates. Humble acceptance of uncertainty is the better, more prudent, route. The Church fosters a pious practice, the Stations of the Cross, to remind the Faithful to be careful about whom they persecute.

The Fourth Station, where Jesus meets his afflicted mother on the Way of the Cross, at the Poor Clare chapel in Barhamsville, Virginia depicts the situation in art. The artist portrays dreadful horror in the eye of Mary, a dread reflecting what the self-righteous angry religious leaders are doing to her divine son. In contrast, a little later at the Eighth Station, the artist depicts the Weeping Women of Jerusalem as smiling, when there is nothing to smile about. Jesus shows the Faithful to accept their crosses of life as part of trying to please God the Father, rather than as anything inherently foolish.

In conclusion, trying to please God is what these readings are about. The readings depict the suffering associated with self-discipline as meaningful in the eyes of God and not as anything inherently foolish. The will of God is life and order, rather than death and disorder. In Isaiah, that means God will bring order out of Cyrus, the gentile. In Psalm 96 that means recognizing God is in charge, after all.  
1 Thessalonians vibrates with the love of God expressed in his Eucharistic people.

Finally, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus answers a trick question with a trick answer, *render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's*. Jesus accepted the suffering of rejection not as something inherently foolish, but as something designed to please God the Father. In this way, as a practical application, that self-discipline found in fasting for good health is appropriate as a spiritual exercise, especially for the Faithful who are overweight.

To re-summarize, the Jews wound up in Exile because they mixed up their priorities, forgetting who their God was. The results remain scary. The future remains as uncertain for the ancient Jews as it does for the Modern Jews and Christians and all of us together. The Lectionary readings offer encouragement for whatever lies ahead, as the Faithful try to hone their talents according to the will of the Almighty.

For more on sources see the Appendix file. Personal Notes are on the web site at [www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes](http://www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes).