

[Readings: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96; 1 Thess. 1:1-5b; Matt 22:15-21]

Some of you who read the bulletin before Mass already know that our Christian Service Director and Parish Nurse, Mrs. Renee' Heileman, after 22 years of dedicated ministry and service as Christian Service Director and Parish Nurse, is retiring. Many outreach programs in our parish were created and developed under her guidance, making Christian Service one of the pillars of our parish and of our community. Renee's retirement begins on Monday.

At her request, and especially because of COVID-19 concerns with our elderly parishioners, there will be no public retirement reception for Renee'. I am asking everyone to write a note to Renee' thanking her for her ministry and service and how she has impacted your life. You can drop off the letters and notes at the parish center, and we will forward them to Renee.'

With this sudden and unexpected news, for now, we will need to suspend all Christian Service activities temporarily until we find the right people to oversee them during this time of transition. Thanks to Mrs. Gerry Kostrzeba, we will try to still have our Thanksgiving and Christmas Holiday Programs. The pandemic and fewer donations will make our HGP look different this year. The pandemic has also put a hold on most of the Christian Service projects already!

Renee' thanks all of us for our outstanding financial and material support, and we thank Renee' for her dedication in doing God's work, and for showing us how to be the hands, the feet and the heart of Jesus! Putting faith in action.

AMEN!

Many of us enjoy a good action/adventure movie. Besides giving us the thrill of high-tech special effects, everything is so clear. Especially those movies that were made in the early days of cinema: the westerns. In old westerns, the heroes are exceptionally good, and the villains are wicked to the core. There is little gray matter in between.

But there is a problem: such movies do not reflect the reality of the world we live in. Sometimes the heroes have feet of clay, and occasionally the bad guy can show a spark of humanity and even do something decent.

We see more and more of that in more recent movies.

That's the case of the Persian King Cyrus in today's First Reading. He should be a warning against being too quick to attach labels and to make judgments. Cyrus was the most ruthless and violent king of a pagan nation and therefore one of Israel's enemies. He would be the last person we might consider as a "messiah," but that is exactly what he is called by God in Isaiah's text! At this stage in Israel's history, though, we must remember that "messiah" merely means "the anointed one" and does not imply a savior. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, Cyrus..."

God admits that King Cyrus does not even know God, yet Cyrus is seen as the instrument of God. Why? Because Cyrus defeats the Babylonians and begins to show a begrudging tolerance for religions other than his own. Eventually, he allows the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland to rebuild their nation, their religion and especially their temple. Things couldn't have gone better for the Israelites!

God can and does use many different individuals and groups of people to accomplish His Divine Will. God's Spirit can run in what we would consider to be an erratic path – God writes straight with crooked lines – and sometimes that Spirit comes to rest in some pretty shocking places. Some of God's choices might make us uncomfortable, even outraged.

We might be in profound disagreement with them on many things. We might even feel that God's choices and blessings should stay "in-house" and the closer to us and to ours, the better!

Jesus snares the Pharisees in their own trap in today's Gospel with His brilliant teaching to "render unto Caesar" Their hypocrisy is revealed for all to see. Note that they are inside the temple itself. Only Jews are permitted there. The Herodians are Jews who are selling out their brother Jews by being hired by the Romans to spy and to tattle tale on the Jews. The Herodians have on their person coins with the image of the Roman self-proclaimed god Tiberius Caesar.

It is idolatry for any Orthodox Jew to carry an object with the image of a false or foreign God. Those coins forbidden in the Temple had to be exchanged

for coins minted by the Orthodox Jews for their temple tax. That's why there are money changers in the Temple. So when this this Herodian Jew produces the idolatrous coin, there should have been a collective gasp in the crowd. Jesus proves the man's hypocrisy.

How do you handle hypocrisy when you confront it in others? Are you able to help them see the error in their ways? Think of a time when you found yourself saying something you really didn't believe, perhaps even for less than honorable reasons. How did you handle being confronted with your own hypocrisy? How were you able to learn and grow from the experience?

Today is World Mission Sunday -- a title that may suggest it's time to sit back and tune out for the rest of my homily. Missionary work, after all, isn't about us. It's about those rare characters running around in jungles spooning out rice and saying Mass in straw huts, right? But Pope Francis says that the Church is "missionary by nature." We are that Church. Which means you and I at our core are missionaries. The pope offers three questions that are at the heart of our Christian identity:

As believers, what's the basis of our mission?

What's at the center of our life as Church?

What fundamental approaches assist us in carrying out our mission?

Being Pope, Francis also supplies answers for our reflection. The basis of our mission is Transformation. We become Church to be transformed by our relationship to Jesus. In turn, we set out to transform the world with this same vital encounter. We "unleash the Gospel" as Archbishop Vigneron tells us.

If the mission is transformation, how does the Church foster this? Three ways: in its worship, in the encouragement to a Spirit-filled life, and in preaching the Gospel passionately and creatively. *In its worship, in the encouragement to a Spirit-filled life, and in preaching the Gospel passionately and creatively.*

Jesus is the first great Evangelizer, the bearer of Good News. Which makes our goal to evangelize and to act: to bring Good News and then to demonstrate how good it really is.

Americans have long seen the wisdom in separating the realms of church and state, giving to God and to Caesar what belongs to each. Regretfully, the territories governed by religion and government often overlap, causing an ongoing crisis for those who see government stomping on sacred ground in right-to-life issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, genetic testing, war, services to the disadvantaged, and assistance to the poor. We may give Caesar our money; we must not give Caesar the authority to determine what's moral for people of faith. That authority belongs to God alone.

What Jesus does suggest is that worldly things are subject to worldly laws and governance. But He also insists there are matters higher and more precious, the use of which cannot be arbitrated by human beings. These belong to God, and Heaven help the one who does not recognize this. Remember this when you vote this year. AMEN!