

The 29th Sunday in the Year of Matthew.

My first visit to Mt. Sinai was one I shall never forget. It was a beautiful day as we made the early morning ascent. The minds of everyone on the pilgrimage were on Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and the deliverance from Egyptian slavery. When we reached the summit everyone agreed that we should pray. Sitting in a circle on the rocks we listened to a passage of scripture and then we decided to visit the church.. Much too our disappointment it was locked and unattended. Adjacent to it was the mosque, which was open. There was a young Muslim man looking after it and he invited us inside for midday prayer. It was a moving and powerful experience as we heard the call to prayer echoing up the valleys from the towns and villages below. We wanted to pray in the Christian church but it was the Muslim community that offered us hospitality for prayer.

Our Old Testament reading described how King Cyrus of Persia was anointed by the God of Israel to deliver his people from Babylonian captivity and restore them to Israel. The Jews in those early days believed that each nation had its own particular God - they were surprised to find their own God in the Promised Land when they reached it. So great was their surprise when they discovered that Cyrus, the great and powerful King of Persia, was being guided by their own God, the God of Israel, actively to bring back the people of Israel from captivity to freedom in the Promised Land. While he was not of their religion or nationality, he was a chosen instrument of their God.

It is natural to be suspicious about outsiders and people with whom we are unfamiliar just as the people of Israel were initially suspicious of King Cyrus. Deep down our suspicion grows out of fear that danger could lurk in the unknown or unfamiliar or from an intervention or initiative from someone outside our own circle or even our own culture. Quite naturally, the fear of the 'outsider' or stranger is caught up with emotions probably because of a negative past experience with the unfamiliar. In the Gospel today Jesus was caught up in that emotional anxiety as the Pharisees and the Herodians attempted to trap him. "Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Many people in Jesus' audience would have been happy about paying the tax because the occupying Government brought peace and security and relative wealth. The Pharisees and their supporters disagreed with payment of the tax because Caesar and his regime was not Jewish and everything for which they stood was against the law of God. So Jesus was in a no-win situation. If he said a public yes then the Pharisees and strict Jews would be against him. If he said no, then the local Roman government and their supporters would cause trouble for him. In fact he could have been arrested and possibly executed. Jesus does not answer the question but instead invited his questioners to show him the denarius coin, a day's wage, which was used to pay the tax. The coin bore the image of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar Son of the Divine Emperor". Jesus' opponents were amazed,

silenced and embarrassed because they were carrying images of an emperor who claimed to be divine. They were themselves breaking their own religious law whether they paid the tax or not because they were not allowed to carry images of God or anyone else come to that.

Having silenced his audience Jesus then takes the matter further and says those famous words "Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God." They knew very well that it was impossible to separate what belonged to Tiberius Caesar from what belonged to God because everything belonged to God even what belonged to Tiberius Caesar, who could only be emperor and ask for taxes because God gave him life and power.

All things belong to God because all things are gifts from God. Every possession, every breathe, every moment and every person is a gift from him, which is the challenge of the Gospel for us. For each of us there will be people, cultures, places, experiences which we are happy to keep outside our own circle and context for life. How many times have I seen a person for the first time and my first thought has been that I must avoid that person for whatever reason? How often are there experiences in my life that trouble me and I hold them at a distance, leave them unresolved or perhaps refuse to face them? Perhaps that is the right thing for now because they are still too painful and raw. How often have I been critical or condemned that culture or way of life of another because it is different from mine?

I know that some of this is true for me and I know that I need to change. "Lord, give me the courage to realize that you are present everywhere; that all things and all people are of your making. Help me to see the threats and the anxieties that frighten me, the people that intimidate or threaten me as opportunities when you are present. Help me to be guided by what is true and good in my response to what is strange and unfamiliar. Some things may be wrong and to be avoided, others will be inviting me to trust you and to see your hand and power in an unexpected place or person where I had decided I would not find your love or strength."

How surprised and amazed we can be when we open the eyes of faith and see the world, life and creation as God sees them.

