

I hope you had a chance to enjoy the beautiful fall weather we've been having. I've been enjoying it. I was trying to figure out why this year seems so much better than last year and then it came to me: no big elections going on. Partisan politics are just the worst. They end up dividing. There were actually people who left their parish and some the Church after the last two elections because of politics. Now something is wrong with our priorities if we let politics and our partisan media divide us to that extreme.

Interestingly, our scripture passages this week give us a glimpse as to how God deals with politics and governments. But first, let's remember where we are in the Gospel of Matthew. In the last couple of weeks, we heard Jesus "indirectly" condemn the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees with parables. Now this week we see they try to get back at Jesus by tricking Him. And the way they did that was to force Him into a dilemma. They figured He either had to side with paying the Roman tax, which would cause a large portion of his followers to abandon him, or He had to side against paying taxes, which would have resulted in Him being arrested and charged with sedition. But as we know, it didn't really work out the way they wanted. Jesus refused to play their game. He changed the "either/or" dilemma the Pharisees presented Him with into a "both/and" resolution: give to both Caesar and God. That, by the way, is very

Catholic. We often find our theology to be full of “both/and”s. Jesus is both God and man. God is both just and merciful. Jesus’ response raised the perspective of the conversation. It was no longer adversarial. He separated the temporal everyday mechanics of running a government from the Church. This stymied His enemies for it was also understood by those who heard the conversation that everything, including empires, are ultimately under the authority of God. However, the Pharisees couldn’t really say anything publicly about that or they might have been in trouble with the Romans. So, one way to retreat from the divisiveness is to raise the level of the conversation, not make it personal. We can’t let partisan politics supersede our shared Christian belief. God is above politics.

No matter how bad we think events might be, or our leaders are, God can and does use the good and the bad in His plan. Did you catch the reference in Isaiah today about how God used Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, to release the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon? He can and will use anyone He wants, no matter how cruel, ineffective, stubborn, or offensive they may be. Perhaps those here today that are worried about our political leadership can find some solace in that. We have to have faith in God. He is above it all and if we can focus on His plan for us, we will remain united.

So, what are those things in God's plan that bind us? Well it's the Church, of course, and the foundations of our faith. And we would expect to find them in the earliest writings of the Church. Do you know where you find the oldest written text in the New Testament? You actually heard it today in the second reading. Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians was written less than 20 years after Jesus' ascension and 20 years earlier than the first gospels were penned. The gospels are, in one way, a retrospective of Jesus life written 40 to 60 years afterwards. In the letter to the Thessalonians, we not only hear the message Paul was trying to get across to this early congregation, but we find clues as to what the first generation of Christians were taught was most important.

At first glance these 100 words seem insignificant; after all they are just the introduction of a letter. But there's more here than meets the eye. Take a look if you want. Paul mentions God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. It will be another 200 years before the Church officially defines the dogma of the trinity, but here, only 20 years in, we find it taking shape. The idea of the trinity may not phase us in the least, but the Jews had spent the better part of 2000 years believing there was only one divine person in God. So, as incomplete as their picture may be, these early Christians saw the connection between God the

Father, Jesus, and (most likely due to the experience at Pentecost) the Holy Spirit.

What else do we find mentioned in this brief introduction? Faith, hope, and love: the three theological virtues, theological meaning they don't come naturally. They are gifts from God and they are connected. Paul refers to “faith” and “love” as “works” and “labors” because that's what they are. They are expressed **both** in our beliefs **and** our actions. Together with hope, they are the foundation of our moral life. They keep us connected to God from the first moment we're conscious of Him until the very end.

Incidentally, we celebrated the funeral of one of the pillars of our parish yesterday, Jack Champion. He lived those virtues quite well I think. I found it interesting at the burial that the final intercession in the committal rite reads, “Comfort us in our sorrow... let our faith be our consolation, and eternal life our hope.” Faith, hope, and love. That my friends is what unites us all in the end.

So, let's keep listening to and pondering more of this letter over the next several Sundays, or open our bibles at home and look ahead. We will see the tenants of our faith were right there at the very beginning. Let these be passed on by our teaching and our examples. Amen.