

Last week we discussed perseverance; finishing the church year with some intentionality and diligence, but also seeing this as representative of finishing our life's race with the same intentionality and diligence and care. We discussed that God guards and keeps us in His household the Church, but we should not neglect that care provided for us by becoming complacent in our participation with His Body. We do not want to have all of our life's work slip through our fingers in the final minutes of the game or in the last yards of the race. Run all the way through the finish line.

What we didn't ask last week was the simplest and yet most profound question in the world. We didn't ask, "Why?" Why is it important for us to finish well? What does it mean to not finish well? What do we risk losing; what does the race symbolize for us? This is what we want to think about this morning.

In our Gospel lesson today, we see once again that the Pharisees are trying to entrap Jesus through their questions. This time they ask Christ, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" Why is this a trap? Well, if Christ says, "Do not pay taxes to the Roman occupiers," then the Pharisees can report Jesus to the Romans as stirring up rebellion. If Christ answers the other way, "Yes, pay taxes to the Romans," then the Pharisees can accuse Him to the Jewish population of being a collaborator. He would be outcast by the people just like the tax collectors were.

And Christ knows that they have evil intentions. They are not really interested in a theological discussion. They are interested in getting Him out of the way. Yet as God incarnate, Christ will not be entrapped by them, and refuses to take either of the two paths that they have laid out for Him. Instead Jesus tells them to take out a coin and then asks them whose image, whose icon, is on the coin. They respond that Caesar's icon is on the coin, to which Christ replies, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's." Christ is affirming that there are civil authorities to whom we owe a measure of obedience. But there is also obedience and duties that we owe to God as well. We are not to neglect either.

Yet at a deeper level, whose image is really on the coin? Caesar's image, yes, but whose image does Caesar, along with all of humanity, bear? "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:27). Intrinsic in every man and every woman and every joining of man and woman is the Image of God. So we acknowledge this truth when we fulfill our duties to the governing powers; as St. Paul says in Romans 13, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no

power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.”

Governments are established so that there would be good order and peace in society. It is not so different with the Church either. Traditionally, the primary priest of a Church is called a rector, which means “ruler” in Latin; it is cognate with our English word “director.” Your priest therefore, rules over you in matters of our corporate worship and matters of morality within our membership. And all human organizations requires the establishment of rules of conduct and means of decision-making. Even had the Fall never taken place, it is highly likely that governments would form to make sure that the priorities of the community were being honored and resources could be dedicated to build and benefit all. Of course in that case, we wouldn't have to worry about corrupt or selfish or power hungry government officials.

In this real world, though, the best case is that a country is organized and ruled in such a way that law and order is maintained and individual freedom of conscience is not infringed. But as we see everyday, this is very difficult to do. For evidence of this, just look around at all of the recent upheaval in our society. Everyone feels like they are being unjustly treated.

The point that Christ is making in the gospel is that our primary allegiance is to God, and yet God has instituted civil authorities for the good of humanity. It is important to see our obedience to our governors, even given their greatly flawed governance, ultimately as obedience to God. But given that God holds our primary allegiance, the point might also come when we will have to disobey the civil authorities in order to obey God. And as often follows when the civil authorities are disobeyed, we may well have to suffer the consequences of disobedience whatever they may be.

Really, we need to understand this as having dual citizenship. We are citizens of an earthly country, but we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. Given that fallen humanity loves power and wealth, that it loves itself over and above all other things, our dual citizenships are often in conflict so it is important to know which one hold your first loyalty. Render unto God the things that are God's.

The Epistle lesson today also highlights the conflict between these kingdoms. In the reading, St. Paul begins with a call to follow the example set by himself and by others who are dedicated to serving God, to honoring the heavenly citizenship. He contrasts this example against that set by enemies of the Cross of Christ, those, “of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping ... .” Evidently St. Paul has in mind specific individuals who had been part of their fellowship, but have since turned away, and thus, they bring great sadness

to the apostle. Paul describes them as being destined for destruction, ruled by passions and pleasures, arrogant in regard to their sin, and focused on the things of the world to the exclusion of the things of God.

It is always very sobering to realize that there is a real potential for individuals to fall away from God in order to pursue their own desires. It is even more sobering to realize that such falling away according to St. Paul here, leads to destruction. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb. 10:31)

Is it understandable that some would be drawn away? Surely. To follow God requires discipline and focus. It is an intentional life. It requires effort. The Christian pursues Christ so he must turn away from worldly and sinful things, and take on a seriousness and soberness in order to progress in holiness. And yet this is not to be a dour and miserable turning from the world. We turn to God in order to find fulfillment and eternal life and the joy that comes from being regenerate by the Holy Spirit and in fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

St. Paul continues in the epistle with the following:

For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed unto the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subject all things unto himself.

Our citizenship is in heaven, the realm ruled within the immediacy of the very presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is our job to extend His rule in ourselves, and to our neighbors, and throughout our world. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When Christ comes again, He will complete the redemption of our bodies, and all things will be finally brought under His dominion and rule. Creation itself will be completely renewed and freed from the corruption of Adam's sin. This is the glorious end that is promised here and elsewhere in scripture.

Our existence here on earth is ruled by death. All the basics of life must be fought for and coaxed out of the ground through our efforts or our labor in other fields. We are governed by the laws of scarcity and we compete for limited resources. This is the Kingdom of this world.

But we are citizens of heaven. In the midst of this fallen world we strive to live by the ethic of eternal life in Christ. This doesn't relieve us from the burden of labor, but we

know that God is the source of all that we need, and we live into that reality through our generosity and through an openness to those around us. God's resources aren't limited, so we are not ruled by the law of scarcity. We are called to do honor to those in power in this world, but we see beyond the powers themselves to our real governor, Jesus Christ, who has established temporal rulers for a time to fulfill God's larger plan of judgement and redemption, leading to the ultimate restoration of all things. Of course the scope of that vision is much greater than the scope of each of our individual lives and even of our parish or local government. The question therefore stands, how then shall we live this out?

That is the adventure of it all, isn't it? First of all, the world's governments aren't monolithic monsters, although it often feels that way; that they are these bureaucratic behemoths. But remember that they all are comprised of individuals who have made choices based on values derived from their own individual worldviews. This may lead them to act in godly and just ways, or to become intoxicated with power, and govern in ways that trample on the citizenry. The point here is that justice and the progressive redemption of the world begins with the individual. We must therefore acknowledge our own agency. Our individual words and actions make a difference. Change starts with each one of us. We cannot control the world. We can control ourselves. Therefore let us first reaffirm a commitment to act justly and serve each other and the world on the individual level.

Secondly, as citizens of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of eternal life and light, we serve the Creator God from whom all blessings and all things flow. In our present existence, we are challenged to learn about the bounty of God through experience, learning to trust Him more and more. And when we see God's provision to our desperate needs, then we begin to understand even more that God is faithful and true, that God is completely trustworthy, and that God is our hope and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. God is our refuge, the rock upon which we stand. When we pray to Him, our souls are comforted, for He cares for us and gives us what we need.

This leads us to the collect. Now, I don't have a direct number to reach President Biden. For multiple reasons, I doubt that he would care to help me even if I did. But we do have a direct connection to God, our ultimate ruler. We can live in an awareness of His constant presence, knowing that He listens to all of our prayers, and knowing He listens, is an answer in itself many times. He hears us in our desperations, and His first response to us is, "It is ok. I am here, I am with you, and I will help you do what you must do." As St. Paul says at the end of Philippians, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in

glory by Christ Jesus.” And God's riches know no end.

So this is the vision set before us today. Last week we were encouraged to persevere in the faith and to live carefully in this world. This week we are shown that to fall away, to fail to persevere, is to lose our heavenly citizenship, breaking the connection to our Ruler and Guide, surrendering the refuge and strength and bounty of God for us. Thanks be to God that He is not exacting with us. His mercies endure forever. He turns not quickly away from His citizens, His children. Christ has purchased for us our citizenship on the cross, and now we are brought near to enjoy eternal fellowship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and to enjoy the bounty of that relationship both today and forevermore. And now let this sacrament, of which we are about to partake, be unto us a sign of that bounty of love and joy and peace.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.