

29th Sunday

A

10-19-08

Here is a little quiz for you. What do these five people have in common: Brian Moore, Cynthia McKinney, Chuck Baldwin, Richard Duncan, and Robert Barr? According to this absentee ballot, each of them is an official candidate for President of the United States. I should mention there are three other names and also space for a write-in (that would be S-t-o-c-k-etc).

Today we are going to meet two other politicians, both of them hugely important, one of them really good, the other one....well, the other one should have been a plumber.

The first political leader is Cyrus, whom the Prophet Isaiah calls the "anointed." The only other people in the Old Testament that were "anointed" were people like King David or the Messiah. And Isaiah tells us that God holds the right hand of Cyrus.

A modern historian claimed that in a list of the most influential figures in history, Cyrus was ranked #87, at least the equal of Alexander the Great. Cyrus was a king who ruled for 30 years, from 559--529 BC. During that time, he founded the Persian Empire, which included present day Iraq, Iran and a lot more: Persia was the largest kingdom the world had ever seen. It would influence the world for 1000 years. 2500 years ago, and with absolute power over lots of people, King Cyrus believed in equality and human rights; he did away with slavery! As a world leader, Cyrus practiced generosity toward his subjects. Cyrus apparently believed in Zoroastrianism, but he favored local religions, and did not force anyone to change their

beliefs. Jews honor Cyrus because in 537 BC, he allowed the Israelite people to return from exile to Israel. (You remember that the Babylonians had invaded the Holy Land and driven the people into exile in what is now Iraq. King Cyrus allowed these Jewish people to return to their homeland.) In other words, because of King Cyrus, Jesus was born in Israel, in Bethlehem. Jews believed he was sent by God to help their people.

The second politician we meet today really should have been a plumber. He was Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius Caesar was the Roman Emperor during Jesus' life; his face was on the famous coin, the denarius, in today's Gospel.

Tiberius was a great general, but a lousy emperor, which he became in 14 AD. He never really wanted to be Emperor, was gloomy, wasn't around much, but then in 23 AD, his son died. After that, Tiberius really didn't care about the Empire. Three years later, in 26AD, Tiberius leaves Rome and spends the last 11 years of his life on a beautiful island called Capri (some of you ladies may be wearing Capri pants). Instead of running the Empire, he goofs off on Capri and lets his generals in charge; they, not the emperor, are running the empire. Now, in 26 AD, the area around Jerusalem needs a strong Roman soldier to straighten things out. While Tiberius is on the Isle of Capri, one of his generals appoints a man to govern Judea; his name.....is Pontius Pilate. Pilate hates his job, knows that Israel is the boondocks. Four or five years after getting to Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate sentences Jesus of Nazareth to death.

If Tiberius Caesar had done his job and been a decent Emperor, Jesus would not have died on the cross that spring Friday afternoon. I should add that Pilate was so barbaric that five years after Easter Sunday, he was recalled to Rome and disappears from history.

King Cyrus allows Jesus to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. 600 years later, Tiberius Caesar allows Jesus to be killed.

The power of civil authority is enormous. Our US government may be sowing seeds that will be remembered 500 years from now-- for better...or for worse.

“In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.” When the US Conference of Catholic bishops write that, they are not thinking just of November 4, or even the next four or eight years. The bishops are thinking of Tiberius Caesar and of Cyrus too. The stakes are very high. So, whomever you vote for this year, remember the power of civil authority--as we give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give everything to God.