

**29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 19, 2008**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

Roland Merullo, a local Boston novelist, has just published a new book. It's called *American Savior: A Novel of Divine Politics*, and it was reviewed quite favorably in both the Boston Globe last week, and in the Washington Post. Publishers's Weekly called it "an uproarious satire" well worth reading.

Jesus returns to earth to run for president of the United States. (The timing of the book's release, obviously, could not possibly be better.) Given the often vitriolic tenor of this year's election cycle, the notion of Jesus joining the campaign is actually quite funny. I won't spoil any of the secrets in the book for you, but I did think of just how appropriate the book was for today's gospel.

We Catholics are frequently treated to this gospel passage around election times. This year is no exception. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God what belongs to God." (Or repay as our translation has it today.) Immediately before this famous line we even have an attempt to formulate a new election debate committee with the Pharisees and Herodians lying in wait for Jesus. And debate they do, but only ever so briefly.

Jesus, the real one in today's gospel, demonstrates that he could easily

hold his own against even such practiced debaters as the two distinguished Senators we have had the pleasure of listening to in three debates now. Like them, Jesus illustrates how deftly he manages to duck a question. Dan Harrington, the scripture scholar who writes for *America* magazine, describes Jesus' reply today as one of "prudent ambiguity." Jesus will not be cajoled into a simple "yes" or "no" answer when the issue is as complex and potentially combustible as this one. If Jesus were to say "yes," it is fine to always pay the Roman tax (unfair and corrupt as it was), he loses many of his Jewish followers. If he says "no," don't pay your taxes, he will surely be reported to the Roman authorities by Herod's followers and be arrested. So he leaves us with a bit of an enigma, while at the same time exposing the real hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Herodians. They are the one's who actually have Caesar's coin in their pockets, not Jesus.

The relationship between political structures and religion has always been complex. It remains so in our own time. And simplistic answers to complex questions leads to disaster as surely today as it would have 2000 years ago. Jesus offers a more complicated solution. He tells the people that *they* must make the concrete decisions themselves, armed with principled moral convictions born of a mature conscience and nurtured in the community of

believers we, today, call the church. There is only rarely a simple right or wrong.

And Jesus had it even easier than we today. On the coin he asked the Pharisees for, he already knew only Caesar's image was engraved. He could say more easily, then give it back to Caesar. In America today, we not only engrave George Washington on our dollar bills, we invoke the name of God as well on each and every one, as if saying: in God we trust as we pay our taxes. But few of us actually believe that, I suspect.

The relationship between God and culture or between God and political systems has had a tortured history for centuries. We have another illustration in today's first reading from Deutero-Isaiah. The Persian king, Cyrus (usually called Cyrus the Great because of his conquests of almost all the known territories in the Mid-East of that time), is used by the God he doesn't even know to free Israel from Babylon. Cyrus was a heathen and a pagan yet brought the deliverance of Israel and thereby the possibility of the Christ to come eight centuries later. The message: it is very hard, indeed, to know *how* God works through human political systems. It is sometimes hard to know even *if* God works in and through some political systems. Human history has ample examples of strange things happening when we think we know whose

side God is really on.

Mature faith relishes questions more than simple answers. I am sorry if the gospel seems disappointing in that regard.

In the fictional Divine Party of Merullo's novel, the fictional Jesus shapes his party's platform; he says it will be based on the beatitudes.

Someone retorts quickly: "They will nail you on national defense." To which Jesus replies: It won't be the first time." But what would it be like for us to scrutinize platforms, parties, and candidates with the beatitudes in mind?

Knowing Jesus is not in fact running this year (and won't next), what would it be like to let the Holy Spirit, the life-giver and sustainer of this planet, have a voice—even a little voice as we prepare to vote?

It is never easy to repay Caesar—especially in these troubled times. But the gospel's real point, the real Jesus, asks a more pointed question: can we not repay God what is God's? We are urged by our Bishops to be faithful citizens this year. Today's gospel suggests that it might be more complicated than we think. And finally, are we sure there is something wrong with the beatitudes as a platform? Just asking.