

Please listen to today's short Gospel reading from the beginning of our service, where Jesus is in the Wilderness for forty days — sort of the model for Lent — and is tempted three times by the devil. This is the “final” temptation in which the Tempter offers Jesus power over the world, meaning Jesus' kingdom would be earth and not . . . well, let's read:

**Matt. 4:8** Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

As I noted in our bulletins, this rejection of earthly authority by Jesus is assailed by one called “The Grand Inquisitor” in the chapter of that name in the great, and I mean *great*, nineteenth century Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*. I am overdue to re-read it. Christianity plays a significant role in the novel.

The Christian Church — and here I mean the capital “C” Church and not a particular part of it, such as a denomination — the Christian Church has suffered in the public eye.

A major part of this for some time was because of clergy abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, and more recent examples are the attempts to politicize Christianity, to make it partisan or uniquely attached to one candidate or another, attempts made by — and these are carefully chosen words — by charlatans and grifters such as Charlie Kirk of a Phoenix based organization called, “Turning Point, USA.” I'll refer you to Tim Alberta's excellent book, *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory* for more on him and a few others; Alberta, himself a professing Christian from evangelical roots and still a member of what at least some call an evangelical church, the denomination Presbyterian Church in America, PCA, is painfully unsparing in pointing to what politics has done to evangelical protestantism.

But although I had intended, using our Scriptures, to spend my time going after the way some Southern Baptists and lots of evangelical Protestant churches seem to have made the pact with the devil that Jesus in the Wilderness refused to make, I want to deal with what might at one point have led some Christians to get into political involvement in the first place: a demand for justice.

In particular, as chance — or God — would have it, as I was putting my finishing touches on all-but-my-sermon slides for today, I read this in “The Wallt Street Journal’s” weekly religion column — and, “yes,” “The Wall Street Journal” has such a column: “How Solzenhitsyn Found Himself — and God.”

That somewhat-difficult-to-pronounce name is that of the man I believe belongs with Nelson Mandela as one of the greatest moral voices in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Best known for his non-fiction work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, *gulag* is a name for a Soviet Russian prison camp, I happen to be a big fan of his fiction in which he deals with the indefatigable will of the human spirit in the face of the horrors of Soviet Communism, under which Solzenhitsyn himself was a prisoner in that “Gulag Archipelago”; I look at him as who Dostoyevsky would have been if born in the twentieth century, and the reason I cite him is that, like Dostoyevsky, Christianity ultimately played a huge part in Solzhenitsyn’s life, in particular, his willingness to stand up to the Soviet, particularly, the Stalinist, authorities, and — the real subject of the column — his unwillingness to protect himself by dishonestly ratting out his neighbors to the Soviet police state. They were children of God first, fellow Soviet citizens somewhere further down the line.

And for those who have not read of the Stalinist Soviet police state — Stalin died in early 1953, — it is worth reading your history and also knowing that Vladimir Putin emerged from the principle tool of the police state. Even though Stalin had been long dead, the KGB did not die with him.

Stalin . . . *and Nero* — Nero, why do I mention his name? Nero was the first century Roman Emperor who blamed Christians for the fire he himself started that burned down Rome — while he by legend played his violin. Whether the apostle Paul died under Nero's persecution of Christians, we simply do not know.

Stalin and Nero, two individuals who, if you had not already done so, would I hope lead you to ask how Paul possibly could have *meant* the words he indeed wrote that we read from Romans — and I hope that I did explain that Paul was probably trying to protect his readers from being accused of plotting against Rome.

Stalin and Nero, the type of “king” against whom God tried to warn the people of Israel and Judah through the prophet Samuel in our Hebrew Bible reading.

Stalin and Nero, sinners indeed . . . but then, so are we all, and when truth be told, it was because we are sinners that God laid down those Ten Commandments and quite a few other specifics, so that despite our sinfulness, we might live in relative peace and tranquility with one another. Governments, to put it another way, are a necessity because of human sin. We have made this point over and over again: the Ten Commandments are to *facilitate* joyful life, not oppress it.

And governments have their role in human life, to which I shall return in a moment.

But while I am saying that Paul's comment about human authorities cannot mean what it says, that Stalin and Hitler and Mao were not put where they were by God, that Paul would not have wanted Christians to support them in their bloody undertakings, there is a Biblical passage attributed to Jesus that I think is also dramatically misunderstood, the passage in all three synoptic Gospels that we usually summarize as “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God, that which is God's.”

Is this a passage speaking, as many claim, about “separation of church and state”? A thousand times no! Let us look at it carefully: *Then they sent to him some Pharisees*

*and some Herodians to trap him in what he said.* A trap was being laid for Jesus, and the issue — note Romans was written before any of the synoptic Gospels: If Jesus said it was “lawful” — meaning under Jewish law — to pay taxes to the emperor, he might have lost the support of the more zealous of His followers among the Jews; if Jesus said it was not “lawful,” the questioners figured the Romans would arrest Him. So what does Jesus say? *He* asks a question that his interrogators understood, which is why they were in awe, but we often fail to understand, which is why to us it is politics: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

*What is the emperor’s?* Can anyone tell me what his interlocutors might have answered to that question?

And that the answer is “Nothing; everything comes from God,” is at the heart of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, *that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

*Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.* These are God’s to give; not Caesar’s to give - -or to take away!

Now, I believe in separation of Church and State; such separation is an important part of our history and of our founding documents, of our “Bill of Rights,” but it was not what Jesus was talking about.

And *separation* of Church and State should — but does not seem to do so — prevent charlatans and grifters pretending that they are advancing Jesus, but in reality are advancing themselves or their political ambitions, so let us not look to the state to oppose them, let us as Christians do so.

But what is proper Christian involvement in this free country's political functioning?

Well, one part is in what I said about Solzenhitsyn's refusing to support oppression by the communists — be a friend, a fellow child of God, before being a fellow citizen, — but it is also being willing to stand up and argue for the values our religion teaches us. A democratic state is not the proper vehicle for evangelism, but it is the proper vehicle for governing justly and honestly — and demanding those qualities of justice and honesty is a legitimate activity of the Church.

There are some policies of government that are troubling. Our faith unquestionably calls for equal rights for all — is that not at the center of “Love your neighbor as yourself”? — but while it also calls for feeding the hungry and clothing and housing the poor, it does not provide guidance on how that is to be achieved, so Christians must be advocates who never lose sight of the end, but do not necessarily have the answers as to how to get there.

And importantly, we must always recognize that God loves those with whom we have political disagreement as much as God loves you and me, and that God does not necessarily approve of our politics any more than we approve of that other guy's.

But the other guy is as loved by God as are we, and it was for that other guy as much as for us that Jefferson wrote those soaring words signed two-hundred-forty-eight years ago this coming Thursday.

And it was for that other guy, as much as for us, that Jesus went to the cross under a predecessor of Nero. He or she is our fellow citizen, but before that, he or she is our *neighbor*.

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Thank you, God, for the privilege of living freely as a Christian in this human state, but let us never mistake it for your earthly body, the Church.

In Jesus' name. Amen.