

Pentecost 20, October 18, 2020 (Mt 22:15-22; Is 45:1-7; I Thess 1:1-10; Ps 96:1-4, 9-12)

The holy gospel according to Matthew, the 22nd chapter (immediately following the parable of the wicked tenants who killed the landowner's son so they could keep the vineyard for themselves): **Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.** This is the gospel of the Lord.

Today's texts point to the power of God: his power in creation, his presence and action in holy history, his desire—his *demand*—to be the only God we worship.

The reading from Isaiah, like much of scripture, doesn't make sense unless we understand the context. The time is around 540 BCE (before the common era), and the Jews are living in Babylon. They'd been taken there as prisoners between 598 and 588 BCE. These 50-plus years are known as the Babylonian Captivity.

In their captivity, God encouraged the Jews to settle in, and to "seek the peace and welfare of the city to which I have sent you" (Jeremiah 29:7). They continued to worship and praise God on foreign soil, even though their temple at home had been demolished, their land laid waste, and their hearts of faith broken. But now God was arranging for their deliverance. And what a strange deliverer God has chosen!

Cyrus was the King of Persia (Iran). He wasn't a Jew. He didn't worship God, the Father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was a pagan, worshiping a god of darkness and another god of light, among other gods—but he was a powerful king. And through the Prophet Isaiah, God appointed Cyrus to bring about the freedom of his chosen people from Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Read the words again: **I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun (light) to the place of its setting (dark), all may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness. . . . I, the Lord, do all these things.**

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By the power of God working through Cyrus the Persian, God's chosen people were set free from their Babylonian Captivity. They were allowed to return to the Holy Land, where they began to rebuild the city of God—Jerusalem—and the temple of the Lord.

Four and a half centuries later, in the courts of that same temple, Jesus was confronted by men of two factions who usually opposed each other. The *Herodians* were faithful servants of King Herod, who supported the Roman occupation of Israel in order to keep his power, as sort of a puppet king. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were preaching faithfulness to the Law of Moses (all 613 statutes, ordinances, and commandments), while they also clung to the oral traditions of their ancestors. The two parties united against Jesus, the upstart teacher of the people.

They put their heads together and came up with a question they were sure would trap Jesus. It concerned paying taxes to Caesar, who ruled the entire Roman Empire and believed everything belonged to him. In order to keep his royal self ever in the minds of the people, he had his image imprinted on the coins of the realm. "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" asked the Herodians and the Pharisees.

Recognizing their trap, Jesus asked for the coin which would pay the tax. The portrait on the coin was of Caesar, and the inscription probably said "Caesar Augustus, Divine Ruler."

Blasphemy! Graven image! Remember the First Commandment? **I AM the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery** (that was the first time God delivered them; release from Babylon was their second deliverance). **You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below**" (Deuteronomy 5:6-8).

According to their laws and traditions, the Pharisees shouldn't even *handle* such a blasphemous coin, let alone pay taxes to one who claimed to be a god! But that was the easy part of Jesus' answer. Underlying this was the deepest, most basic truth of our faith: In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, **God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them** (Genesis 1:27). And so Jesus answered his opponents, "**Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's.**"

What are we supposed to give to God? The things stamped with God's image—*us! Ourselves!* Our *whole* selves, not just some part.

- Our minds, willing to learn from God's Word.
- Our hearts, willing to serve all the world with God's compassion and justice.
- Our time—not just the one or two hours we spend in worship each week, but all 168 hours in the week.
- Our treasure—not just the 2% we place in the offering plate, not even just the tithe—the 10% religions preach about—but 100% of all that we have.

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One of my very favorite hymns is entitled *We Are An Offering*. It's in the red hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (#692). I print the words with our license from CCLI, #706169:

We lift our voices, we lift our hands, we lift our lives up to you: we are an offering. Lord, use our voices, Lord, use our hands, Lord, use our lives, they are yours: we are an offering. All that we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be, we give to you, we give to you. We lift our voices, we lift our hands, we lift our lives up to you: we are an offering, we are an offering.

When we give to God the things that are God's, there's nothing left to give to anyone else. It's all God's!

And because we're all God's—because we all belong to God—he cherishes us in every way. He loves us just the way we are. He loves to forgive our trespasses, even as we forgive others who sin against us. His deepest desire is to love us into wholeness, so we can give ourselves wholly to him—just as he has given himself wholly to us!

Here's your homework assignment for the week: Every time you look in a mirror, see the image of God. See the imprint of God on your forehead, made when you were *sealed by the Holy spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever*. See a beloved child of God for whom Jesus died to prepare the way for life everlasting!

Thanks be to God!