

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year A, Lectionary 29

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

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The issue of religion and politics thrust itself on center stage recently when pastor of a Dallas Evangelical mega-church, who introduced Republican presidential hopeful Rick Perry at the so-called “Values Voter Summit,” insisted publically that Mormonism, the faith of Republican opponent Mitt Romney, is a *cult*. The pastor went on to say that “those of us who are born-again followers of Christ should always prefer a competent Christian to a competent non-Christian like Mitt Romney.”

I wonder if this Evangelical pastor has ever read Isaiah 45, from our First Lesson for today. If any passage would make a pious believer’s hair stand on end it would be the first verse from chapter 45: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed [translate *messiah*] to Cyrus . . .” Cyrus was the king of Persia. Cyrus did not recognize the God of the Jewish people as the true God. The Persians worshipped the god of the day and the god of the night. Yet the God of the Jews calls Cyrus his *anointed*—his *messiah*. How blasphemous could this be to the pious Jew!

God appointed Cyrus—*anointed* Cyrus—*messiah*-ed Cyrus—to deliver the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, and Cyrus, in defeating the Babylonians, allowed the Jews who had been deported to Babylon to return to their beloved Israel.

It seems that God can and does use even non-believers to do God’s will.

The tension between religion and politics is also evident in our gospel reading for today. The religious and political tensions that we are experiencing here in the United States right now pale in comparison to what was going on in Jerusalem during Jesus’ time. Tensions were white hot. The Romans had overrun Israel, set up their own government, collected taxes from ordinary working Jewish citizens and sent the money to Rome to further extend and strengthen its brutal empire. If the word *taxes* is a dirty word to us, it was an explosive word to the average working Jew during Jesus’ day.

So the Pharisees collude with their natural enemies, the Herodians, a pro-Roman secular party that supported the oppressive regime of Herod the Great and his successors, in order to try to entrap Jesus.

They ask Jesus a question, prefacing it with pious sounding but insincere flattery: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality . . .”

That surely set Jesus' teeth on edge! They go on, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, on not?"

Not only do the Pharisees and the Herodians wait to hear what Jesus will say, but so does the crowd. If Jesus says, "Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor," the crowd will turn against Jesus, for they hate the Roman occupation. If Jesus says, "No, it is not lawful," the religious leaders can go to the Romans and accuse Jesus of treason against Rome and have him arrested. The atmosphere is filled with white hot expectation.

But Jesus turns the tables and puts the Pharisees to the test, the Pharisees who purport to uphold the law of Moses. Jesus says, "Show me the coin used for the tax." They bring out a denarius, a Roman coin bearing the image of Caesar, the Roman emperor, and the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus," in short, "Caesar, Son of god, high priest." This is blasphemy to any pious Jew, all the more to the Jewish religious leaders such as the Pharisees. Yet it is the Pharisees who produce the coin. Jesus has trapped them and they know it. Jesus says, "Whose head—whose image—is this, and whose title?" They fall into the trap, "The emperor's." The Pharisees have on their person a coin that violates the commandments and is an affront to the sovereignty of God. It is forbidden them to have any graven images, and this image of Caesar proclaims Caesar to be divine.

Jesus' reply to their test question is simple yet enigmatic: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

There is no mistaking the point when Jesus asks the question, "Whose *image*?" The Pharisees and everyone in the crowd know the word "image." It is from the first chapter of Genesis, from the first Creation account. We have been made in the *image* of God. We *belong* to God. All that we are and all that we have belongs to God.

If we are made in the image of God, if we belong to God, then others ought to see God in us.

The Apostle Paul knew what that was all about. Since the day the risen Christ revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul sought to *imitate* Christ in all that he said and all that he did. From our Second Lesson, Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord . . . so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.
(1 Thessalonians 1:6-8)

Imagine that we at Concordia might imitate Christ so as to become an example to all those around us, so that the word of the Lord might sound forth from us, not only in Woodland, but throughout Duluth and into all of northern Minnesota.

The bottom line in our gospel is that those of us who bear the image of God are called to imitate Christ in bearing witness to the love and mercy of God. There are no boundaries to that love and mercy. Yes, we even bear witness to the love and mercy of God in and through our politics. There are no boundaries.

God claims sovereignty over *all* creation, whether we acknowledge that sovereignty or not. And God can use even those who do not profess the faith that we profess to do God's will.

Sometimes those who do *not* profess Jesus do a better job of imitating Jesus than some of us who do—who profess Jesus with our lips but betray him with our actions. Our prophet Isaiah knew that. A certain Evangelical preacher in Dallas—and all of us who profess Christ—would do well to remember that.

Thanks be to God!