

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost
October 19, 2008
Matthew 22:15-22; Isaiah 45:1-7; I Thess. 1:1-10

“Caesar, Cyrus, Christ”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Three names are apparent in the Scripture readings for this week and those names are the basis for our theme as well: “Caesar, Cyrus, Christ”. As we consider the readings we will see that they are most appropriate for this time in our history and lives as God’s people. It is probably good to also point out that these are the assigned readings for this week. They were not specially selected. It is again noteworthy that the church year readings often speak to the times and situations most directly. Yet that should not be surprising since the Word of God is applicable in season and out of season. May the Lord teach us by His Word.

I. Caesar

The Gospel lesson relates that the Pharisees were attempting to trap Jesus. They wanted him to say something that would get him in trouble with the governing authorities. It is interesting that the text states that they enlisted the help of the Herodians, because most of the time the Pharisees and the Herodians would have had little in common. And while appearing to complement Jesus, they have nothing but mischief in mind. “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” But Jesus does something remarkable. He knew what they were after. It was a cleverly designed trap. So he asks them to bring him a coin used for the tax and asks them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They tell him, Caesar’s. So he says to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

Caesar who? Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus, born 42 BC, died 37 AD. The successor of Caesar Augustus as the second Roman Emperor, who reigned from 11 to 37 AD. A soldier, a statesman, whose early reign was considered good but who later degenerated into a debauched and wicked old man overcome by insane jealousy and rage who killed supposed rivals with impunity. Upon his death, the populace of Rome is reported to have shouted, “To the Tiber with him,” which was the common burial ground for criminals. He was succeeded by his nephew, Caligula, whom he chose as his successor in the hope that as some historians relate, Caligula’s reign would cause the people to forget Tiberius. And that was surely as it was, for Caligula was worse.

Now this is the Caesar whom Jesus means when he says, “Render (Give) to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Here we have a basic simple teaching of what is called the doctrine of the two kingdoms. God has established governments throughout the world (his left hand) as well as the church (his right hand) There is a legitimate and good purpose for government that we

may lead quiet and peaceable lives. So give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

II. Cyrus

And the next person on our list, Cyrus, would remind us that it is God who is in control of all things. The Old Testament reading is a remarkable and perhaps little known prophecy of Isaiah. It is remarkable because it is addressed to a specific person, namely, Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered the Babylonian empire and allowed the Jews in captivity to return to their homeland, rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Remarkable because Isaiah wrote it 200 years before Cyrus would rule. The Lord tells him that he is his chosen, his anointed with a specific task. "For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me." The Lord is telling Cyrus that he has a purpose for him. "I equip you, though you do not know me." Here in no uncertain terms we see that the Lord is the ruler of all things. He can even use someone who does not know Him to accomplish his works. There is evidence from history that it was so with Cyrus. The Jewish historian Josephus relates that the Jewish exiles in Babylon showed Cyrus this prophecy of Isaiah and that he was moved by it to allow them to return to Jerusalem. There is also evidence that he acknowledged the Lord, but only in the same way that he acknowledged the gods of other nations as well. It was his policy to allow the formerly captive peoples to return. But he continued to worship Marduk and Bel and the idols of Babylon. Nevertheless, the Lord used him for his purpose for as the prophecy says, "I am the Lord, and there is no other."

The fact that Isaiah is able to speak so clearly about Cyrus has caused some to doubt that he wrote these words. But if we consider the fact that he also spoke very clearly about one who would come over 700 years after him, the one who would be the servant of the Lord and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the one who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities then it becomes clear that it is the Spirit of God at work in the mind of the prophet. For Isaiah speaks not just of Cyrus, but of Christ as well.

In this Old Testament text we have been reminded that it is by the providence of God that the rulers of the nations are established. We are privileged in our land to be able to elect our leaders. We are not ruled by kings. But the privilege of elections brings with it a great responsibility as well. For as Christians we cannot forget the will of God. There might be two kingdoms, but we walk in both of them at the same time and you can not split yourself in two. We cannot follow one thing on Sunday and something else the rest of the week. The saying may be overused but it is so true, "May God give us the rulers we need, not the rulers we deserve." Be sure of this, God's will will be done and all things will work together for the good of those who love him.

III. Christ

And finally, that brings us to Christ. Not finally, but centrally, most importantly. Jesus said,

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's and they did not know how to answer him. No, for the Son of God was placing everything in the proper perspective. For what truly are the things of God? Are they not everything? For God has given us all things and we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind.

Most specifically God has given us his Son. So in the thanksgiving which we heard from the opening chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we are reminded of the work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. All things are God's including ourselves. God has chosen you. And as Paul reminds the Thessalonians he reminds us as well, "you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." There is the Gospel in brief but powerful words. Jesus, raised from the dead delivers us from the wrath to come. We put our hope in Him.

Tiberius Caesar is at most a little paragraph in history. Cyrus the Persian is even less known. For most people they have passed away in the dust of time. Their empires are gone. There may be few evidences of their existence, but they like all things have passed away. Will the same be said of our land some day? But there is one who remains, one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. He remains our hope, our joy and strong and mighty fortress. As we sang at the beginning of this service:

Earth, hear your Maker's voice
Your great Redeemer own
Believe, obey, rejoice and worship him alone
Cast down your pride.
Your sin deplore and bow before the Crucified.

Finally, as we approach the election, we hear the words from the Lord to Solomon: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

In Jesus' Name. Amen.