

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96 (95); 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, to God what belongs to God

Matt 22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” 21 They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For places where Mission Sunday is not marked today, we follow the lectionary in Ordinary Time. The First Reading and the Gospel are somewhat disconcerting. The reading from Isaiah portrays God using the recent Persian empire to achieve his will while the Gospel shows Jesus distinguishing and separating politics and faith. The relationship between the two is never total separation and never total overlap, as we know.

KIND OF WRITING

Like many of these stories, this is technically a *chreia* or anecdote, this time in form of a question and answer and concluding with a *sententia*, a kind proverbial saying with its own power.

In Matthew, Jesus is shown teaching in the Temple in 21:23-22:46. There are really two parts of which our reading opens the second part, 22:15-46. The purpose of this section seems to be to expose the inadequacy of the teachers of Israel. Pharisees and Sadducees are profiled in futile disputes intended to trip



DENARIUS OF THE EMPEROR TIBERIUS

up Jesus. There are three moments: (a) a question about paying taxes to Caesar (22:15-22); (b) a question about the resurrection (22:23-33); and (c) a question about the greatest commandment (22:34-40).

The unity across this Temple section may be seen in the opening and closing remarks: *So they answered Jesus, “We do not know”* (Matt 21:27) and *No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.* (Matt 22:46)

A scholar called Daube has noticed that the four “cases” in this section follow the categories of rabbinic discussion: (i) wisdom—the tax; (ii) ridiculing a belief—the resurrection; (iii) moral conduct—the greatest commandment; (iv) legend—the question about David. Once again, there is more to these supposedly simple stories than meets the eye.

An event earlier in the first century helps us grasp what is at stake. In AD 6, there was a revolt by Judas of Galilee against the imposition by the Romans of the poll tax. The grounds given were that it was tantamount to idolatry. Judas and his sons were crucified. The “innocent” or “theoretical” question is therefore fraught with real danger.

The modern reader may also miss what an ancient reader would never miss: the Pharisees have in their pockets *in the temple precincts* coins bearing the image of Tiberius. It was precisely to prevent such an eventuality that the money changers existed, out of respect for the ban on graven images.

Thought for the day

The relationship between religious faith and public life is perplexing. In some societies, even today, there is virtually no difference between the two. In other, more secular societies, any expression of religious conviction is unacceptable in public. It is true of course that there is an appropriate distinction and even separation to be made, as indeed Jesus does make today in the Gospel. But on at least two issues, there is bound to be some crossover. Religious faith informs our values and in society today policies and laws must be grounded, not in a particular faith certainly, but in values nevertheless.

Prayer

Lord, we need your wisdom to tell what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar. Send your Holy Spirit into the heart of all believers that we may be true to ourselves and tolerant towards people with whom we disagree.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Exodus 20:4)

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Deuteronomy 5:8)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut 6:4-5)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?” He said, “Yes, he does.” And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, “What do you think, Si-

mon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” When Peter said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.” (Matthew 17:24–27)

Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21)

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. (Matthew 21:12)

ST PAUL

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. (Romans 13:1–4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 Before we hear the story, the ill-will of the Pharisees is laid bare. It may be that they hope not only to discredit Jesus but also to gather information for use against him. The malevolence is linked to the last mention of the Pharisees in 21:45. Much earlier, we read: *But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.* (Matthew 12:14) Testing Jesus has occurred before: 16:1 and 19:3.

Verse 16 The subject of the infinitive (actually a present participle in Greek) is evidently the Pharisees, who are thereby speaking *through* their disciples. This is the only mention in the New Testament of the disciples of the Pharisees and they are linked with the Herodians elsewhere only in Mark 3:6.

The mention of the Herodians suggests some kind of collaboration with supporters of Herod and his dynasty, although it is unclear what that might have entailed. At the time, there was

even a synagogue entitled “of the Herodians” in Rome.

The opening speech is a manipulative *captatio benevolentiae* to disarm Jesus with flattery. They give themselves away however with the term teacher which, in Matthew, is regularly on the lips of non-disciples (8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16; 22:24). The hypocrisy is both enormous and evident. Jesus is being invited to incriminate himself.

Verse 17 A very clever question because both yes and no could be used against Jesus. The poll tax was a painful reminder of the Roman occupation.

Verse 18 In this Gospel, Jesus has from time to time special knowledge (12:15; 16:8; 20:10). Matthew upgrades Mark’s hypocrisy to malice. The term “hypocrites” is then used further on. Test is used only of Jesus in this Gospel: 4:1, 3; 16:1; 19:3; 22:35.

Verse 19 People were obliged to pay the tax in Roman coinage. The denarius was a Roman silver coin weighing originally about 4.55 grams. It was a worker’s average daily wage and features frequently in Matthew (Matt 18:28; 20:2, 9–10, 13; 22:19).

Verse 20 The word of image is *eikōn* (whence icon). The inscription would read something like this: *Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.* Idolatry in image and in deed. Precisely because of such imagery and idolatry, these coins could not be used in the Temple.

Verse 21 The emperor is literally Caesar. A double answer: Caesar’s name is on it, therefore, it is his. Giving it back would be a way of getting rid of it, because an observant Jew ought not to have had such a thing in his possession. Furthermore, Caesar may be satisfied by getting just “his” money back. God, however, is altogether more all-encompassing in his expectations! In light of a thorough recognition of who God is, the pedestrian business of paying a tax shrinks into insignificance.

We see here that Jesus was no zealot or revolutionary. At the same time, however, he put the priority not on loyalty to secular government but on loyalty to God, a choice “costing not less than everything.” In this way Jesus manages more than a clever avoidance strategy; on the contrary, the attack becomes the occasion for teaching a full submission of self to God. The state does indeed have legitimate claims but each human being, in a total sense, belongs to God

and to God alone.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story sees a mixture of religion and politics, a potentially explosive combination. Jesus does not ask us to avoid politics, but that our involvement in the affairs of the world be informed by the perspective of the Reign of God. How does the gospel give you a vision of how your involvement in society should be?

2. Pharisees and Herodians were not natural allies but a shared dislike of Jesus brought them together in an attempt to discredit him. Perhaps you experience the same opposition in society today when you profess to being a Christian or a Catholic. Jesus did not get into an argument with them but simply professed his belief in the priority of God in his life. What have you found helpful in bearing witness to the fact that you are still a believing Christian or still go to church?

3. Jesus recognises that we can be faced with conflicting claims for attention. He does not tell us how to solve that dilemma, but challenges us to make sure that our allegiance to God takes priority. When have you been faced with a conflict of loyalties? What helped you to get your priorities right?

PRAYER

O God, whose image we bear and whose name we carry, yours is the world and all it contains.

Recall us to our true allegiance, so that above the power and rulers of this world you alone may claim our fullest loyalty and love.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

PRAYER FOR MISSION SUNDAY

Almighty and ever-living God, who in Christ revealed your glory to all the nations, watch over the works of your mercy, that Holy Church, spread throughout the whole world, may persevere with steadfast faith in confessing your name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

For more resources for Mission Sunday, visit www.wmi.ie, the website of World Missions Ireland.

Your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope

1 Thess 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

1 Thess 1:2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of *faith* and labour of *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, the readings turn towards expectation of the end. Accordingly, we begin reading from 1 Thessalonians for the five Sundays. Especially on Sundays 32 and 33 the end of time will be in view. The whole letter is quite short this might be a chance to read it all through again.

KIND OF WRITING

	Letter	Speech
1:1	Greeting	
1:2-8 and 9-10	Thanksgiving	Introduction (Thesis)
2:1-3:13	Body of the Letter	Proof 1
4:1-12		Proof 2
4:13-5:11		Proof 3
5:12-27		Conclusion
5:28	Greeting	

Our reading, therefore, offers the letter introduction (v.1) and half of the thanksgiving/introduction (vv. 2-5). Vv. 6-10 will be heard next Sunday. The thanksgivings are in all Paul's letters (except Galatians) and they serve a double function. Firstly, they serve to "connect" Paul with those he is writing to. Here, combining their story with his prayer and affection. Secondly, they serve to anticipate topics which will arise in the body of the letter. Paul commences the rebuilding of relationships which will

take up all of chs. 2 and 3.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

With 1 Thessalonians, we encounter not only the earliest Christian document but also the third phase of Paul's career. For about forty years, he had lived and studied as a Pharisee (from about 6 BC until about AD 34-36). After his encounter with Christ, Paul had a ministry around Syria and Cilicia (from his encounter until about AD 48). Paul thus had about fifteen years experience as an evangeliser, even though from this period no letters survive. The final stage of his ministry is the Paul we know from the letters, the indefatigable traveller and tireless promotor of the Good News. This period, also about fifteen years in length, began in Europe with his preaching first in Philippi and later in Thessalonica. Thus, although 1 Thessalonians is indeed the first Christian document to come down to us, it is rich in teaching, rooted in Paul's experience of proclamation for about fifteen years, not to speak of his forty years as a faithful Pharisee.

It is known that Paul was in Corinth in the winter of 51 and spring of 52 AD. From there, he wrote his first letter to the (very few) Christ-believers in Thessalonica. Evidently, Paul preached there for some time (longer than intimated in the Acts) and then continued on his way to Athens. While in Athens, the Thessalonians sent word about some kind of persecution. They were indeed distressed and needed Paul to come to them again. However, he was unable to come himself and sent Timothy instead. Timothy found the believers distressed and upset at Paul's apparent lack of concern. Eventually, Timothy made his way back to Paul, by then in Corinth, and reported everything to Paul including some questions they felt themselves unable to answer. Paul's letter back is our 1 Thessalonians. In the nature of the case, the first part of the letter is devoted to a certain amount of fence-mending with the Thessalonians.

RELATED PASSAGES

But since we are of the day, we must stay sober by putting on the breastplate of *faith* and *love* and as a helmet our *hope* for salvation. For God did not destine us for wrath but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Thess 5:8-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The letter is *not* by Paul alone but by the group of the closest collaborators. The word "church" is really "assembly", a neutral word, which has to be qualified by "in God" to make it clear *which* assembly. The greeting is a traditional one from Jewish practice.

Verse 2 The believers in Thessalonica are part of Paul's relationship with God in prayer. Of course, it is very compelling that someone prays for you *always and constantly*.

Verse 3 Paul acknowledges the difficult experience of the Thessalonians—an essential step in restoring their bond. The Pauline triad—faith, love and hope—seems in the wrong order but it comes up again in 5:8-9. The order mirrors the sequence of the letter, in which Paul discusses how they came to *faith*, how to live *love* and to *hope* for. The other triad—work, labour and steadfastness—is also eloquent.

Verses 4-5a Paul affirms God's election of the Thessalonians and he proves it with the evidence of the charismatic gifts—always important—and the sheer conviction, the "stickability" of the new Christ-believers. Such recognition of their reality is part of Paul's attempt to restore good relations.

Verse 5b This half verse seems unexpected. As part of his evocation of how they came to faith, Paul hints (!) at his own behaviour. The Thessalonians must have doubted that he was as sincere as he had appeared at the time. His failure to come and even worse his sending of a "second in command" must have left them wondering had they misread Paul's love for them. Was he really so sincere? Chapters 2 and 3 will tell more.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Have you had the experience of people praying for you and how did you feel? Have you prayed seriously for others?
2. Like the Thessalonians, are you under pressure for your faith? Are you able to bring it into prayer?

PRAYER

Good and loving God, deepen our love, strengthen our faith, enliven our hope that we may know the power the Spirit in our everyday lives. Amen.

For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by name

Isa 45:1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
 whose right hand I have grasped
 to subdue nations before him
 and strip kings of their robes,
 to open doors before him—
 and the gates shall not be closed:
 2 *I will go before you
 and level the mountains,
 I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
 and cut through the bars of iron,*
 3 *I will give you the treasures of darkness
 and riches hidden in secret places,
 so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
 the God of Israel, who call you by your name.*
 4 For the sake of my servant Jacob,
 and Israel my chosen,
 I call you by your name,
 I surname you, though you do not know me.
 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other;
 besides me there is no god.
 I arm you, though you do not know me,
 6 so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
 and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
 I am the LORD, and there is no other.
 7 *I form light and create darkness,
 I make weal and create woe;
 I the LORD do all these things.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In our passage, a major change of government is presented as part of God's very own government of history. Cyrus, king of Persia, entered Babylon on 29 October 539 bc. He controlled by decentralisation and hence he permitted the exiles to return. In the eyes of Isaiah, Cyrus became an instrument of God (see titles below!). In our passage, it is Cyrus who is addressed and called. The insistence on monotheism was perhaps unnecessary as Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, who already believed in only one God.

KIND OF WRITING

Within the narrative world of Second Isaiah, we are in the heavenly court and we are overhearing a divine edict proclaiming and installing Cyrus as God's instrument. The full text of seven verses underlines with considerable emphasis that this is all God's initiative. Accordingly, the passage is quite hymnic, with the following shape:

- v.1a: YHWH addresses Cyrus
- v.1bc: The purpose God's call
- v.2-3a: YHWH will go before you

v.3b-7: that all may know it is YHWH

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Within Second Isaiah, our reading has a particular outline, being part of a slightly longer section.

- A. YHWH speaks to Israel (44.24-28)
- B. YHWH speaks to Cyrus (45:1-7)
- C. YHWH speaks to Israel (45:8-13)

In all three sections, Cyrus is named:

"...who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose"; and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." (Is 44:28). I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the LORD of hosts. (Is 45:13)

RELATED PASSAGES

(i) Cyrus is mentioned by name in Is 44:28–45:1; 45:13. He was a real historical figure (see the cylinder above). He assumed the titles of kingships which he had conquered. In Egypt, he was proclaimed Son of Re. In the Bible, apart

from being named, he is referred to as Shepherd, the Lord's Anointed (= messiah, literally) and Servant.

(ii) Cyrus permitted the return to Judah and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is reflected in Ezra 1:1-8.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 "Anointed" was usually reserved for priests or kings. Eventually, Judaism used the term for an expected deliverer or messiah. Earlier, God had used the Assyrians to punish Israel and now he uses the Persians to restore his chosen ones. "Taking the hand" is very daring because the ruler of Babylon took hold of the hand of Bel at the New Year's festival. Gates were indeed opened for Cyrus, under the grace of YHWH.

Verse 4 It is YHWH, that is God as revealed to Israel, who is speaking. Cyrus knows God, of course, but not yet YHWH, the lord of history. The motive for God's choice is his election of Israel.

Verse 5 In vv. 15-17 and 23-24, it is possible that Cyrus responds to this calling of the God unknown to him.

Verse 6 The universal scope of God's vision apparent: from east to west.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is not only Cyrus who was called to bring about relief and be an instrument of hope: all of us are the hands of God in our own time and place. Give thanks to God for calling and gifts and ask him that you may use them well.

2. "I call you by name, though you do not know me" speaks to the experience of us all. A marvellous line from Ps 81 may help: *I hear a voice I had not known: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden."* (Ps 81:5-6)

PRAYER

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96 (95); 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel relativises human government in favour of God's claim on all humanity. The first reading, in a different way, teaches the very same thing.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 96 (95) is a great hymn of praise. It is very suitable because it seems to inhabit the same theological and linguistic world as Second Isaiah.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

The great exile in Babylon—587-539 BC—was catastrophic for the Israelites. When it did eventually come to an end and it was possible to return to Judea and Jerusalem, the ruler who made all this happen was a foreigner, Cyrus of Persia. Not surprisingly, he was remembered with the deepest gratitude. In our reading, God appoints Cyrus as the historical agent of his will.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

We begin reading today from the earliest surviving Christian writing, the first letter to the Thessalonians. At the time of writing, the Thessalonians were undergoing harassment and persecution. In his opening prayer, Paul reflects on their fabulous reaction to his proclamation of the Gospel.

Gospel

Matthew 22:15-21

Some supposed admirers try to trip up Jesus and he very neatly trips them up in return. However, there is more to the scene than clever verbal battles.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 19 October

St John Brébeuf and companions, martyrs

Ephesians 2:1-10

Our reading contrasts our life apart from faith and our life now in Jesus. There is a great reminder of just who we are in the phrase “you are God's work of art” (JB).

Luke 12:13-21

There is a prayer in the psalms which runs, “Lord make us know the shortness of our life.” Usually, we need no reminding, but, as we heart the Gospel, sometimes we do, as we listen to Jesus, the teaching of wisdom.

Tuesday 20 October

Ephesians 2:12-22

It might seem that the concerns of this reading are confined to the first century: the communion of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. It is much greater than that: God was reaching out to *all of humanity without distinction*, showing us how much he loves us..

Luke 12:35-38

Parables of watchfulness are not uncommon but this one contains a major role reversal: the master *will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on his own slaves*. The story of the washing of the feet in John's Gospel comes to mind as does another sentence from Jesus: “*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45).

Wednesday 21 October

Ephesians 3:2-12

Sometimes, we can be so at home in the faith that a sense of wonder and transcendence may no longer be present. Our reading today should restore our feelings of awe before the mystery of our life in Christ.

Luke 12:39-48

The Gospel reading—from the “gentle” Luke—is both comforting and uncomfortable. It is comforting: fidelity will be rewarded. It is uncomfortable: there are consequence to our choices. Originally, it was aimed at disciples who had become complacent about God's mercy. This may well be a risk to day as well.

Thursday 22 October

St John Paul II, bishop of Rome

Ephesians 3:14-21

The writer bursts into prayer—and what a prayer! The reading lifts up our eyes from the everyday to see just how marvellous our life in Christ really is.

Luke 12:49-53

There is a strange juxtaposition of images at the start of this Gospel: fire and water. Fire points to purification and judgement, part of the tradition proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Water points to Jesus' own role in the coming of that Kingdom. The verses which follow reflect early Christian experience. When a family member become a disciple, often this created difficulties with society in general and family in particular. This is becoming the case again today.

Friday 23 October

St John of Capistrano, priests

Ephesians 4:1-6

Even in earliest Christianity, conflict was the normal experience. Normal doesn't mean acceptable and so the advice given here applies today as much as ever before.

Luke 12:54-59

The first part of today's short Gospel is a clear invitation to read the signs of the times and not to miss the moment of grace. The second part is more of a puzzle. Why did Jesus talk about taking your opponent to court? Firstly, it does reflect culture of Palestine at the time. Secondly, it teaching that now is the time to accept the gift of reconciliation already achieved in Jesus.

Saturday 24 October

St Anthony Mary Claret, bishop

Ephesians 4:7-16

What does it mean to be part of the body of Christ? It means enjoying the different gifts so that flourishing individually we may grow in love.

Luke 13:1-9

Again, we have a reading in two parts. The first part is severe warning: you cannot tell when you life will end. We know this for our own experience of the unpredictable. The second part is a parable of “second chance.” Again, it does speak of a second opportunity, but *now is the time. See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!* (2 Corinthians 6:2)