

October 18, 2020
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Abbey Church
Fr. Thomas Esposito

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thess 1:1-5b; Matthew 22:15-21

Jesus is not the only Messiah. [Gasp!] He happens to be the last and best one, which is the important point for us Christians...so no need to call the heresy hotline on me! The Messiahs mentioned in the Old Testament are almost always the kings of Israel, the anointed ones descended from David who know the God of Israel as their father, and themselves as beloved sons.

The prophet Isaiah was surely aware that he was introducing a shocking concept to his original audience when he communicated the message of the Lord pronounced in today's first reading: "Thus says the Lord to His anointed – literally, to His *messiah* – Cyrus." The shock is not that the prophet refers to a king as the messiah, specially chosen for a glorious mission, but rather that this particular king is not even an Israelite. Cyrus the Great, as history knows him now, was a pagan Persian, leader of the latest empire-bully on the Ancient Near East block...and the only non-Israelite to receive the title *messiah* in the Bible. By Isaiah's own account, Cyrus did not even know the Lord God of Israel...and yet the language describing his role in salvation history is providential and wondrous. What would prompt the Lord to sing such strange praise about a foreigner?

Some historical background is essential to understand the prophet's proclamation. The Babylonians had sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carted the Davidic king and many others off into exile around the year 587 B.C. Roughly 50 years later, Cyrus and his Persian forces conquered Babylon, and inherited its vast kingdom. The praise lavished on Cyrus by the biblical prophet foretells Cyrus' edict permitting the exiled Israelites to return to their land and rebuild their Temple. As Isaiah presents the Lord's words, speaking as it were to Cyrus himself, the force of the divine logic is quite jarring: "For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by your name [Cyrus], giving you a title [*messiah*, anointed one], though you knew me not. I am the LORD and there is no other, there is no God besides me. It is I who arm you, though you know me not, so that toward the rising and the setting

of the sun people may know that there is none besides me.” The most powerful ruler on earth at the time, Isaiah asserts, is simply doing the Lord’s bidding as a servant, an unwitting messiah tasked with ending the exile of God’s people and allowing them the thrill of a new exodus, a restoration of the covenant, a return to the promised land.

Had Isaiah spoken of Cyrus as “the Lord’s anointed” while the exiles were in the darkest days of their Babylonian captivity, he might have been ridiculed as a dreamer or a false prophet spewing heretical hope to a battered people. Despite exhortations from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the temptation to despair of ever returning home must have been constant and strong in the hearts of the exiles...Yet Isaiah provides his fellow sufferers with the long view of history, the divine education course that no one could possibly comprehend if their focus was solely on present misfortune.

The first reading is old history, to be sure, but it offers a perennial lesson that is especially valuable to us today. On a sociopolitical level, we do well to remember that supposed enemies may be employed by our provident and loving God for some good that remains totally off our radar in the here and now. This truth (which simply acknowledges that God can work through human sinfulness while not celebrating or condoning it) can only be perceived by those who do not think in Tweets, or for whom life is a perpetual knee jerk of emotional outrage.

The relationship between the two messiahs highlighted today, Cyrus and Jesus, invites us to reflect calmly on why no political situation, however dire or portentous it may seem, should cause us to despair. If God is speaking truly through Isaiah, and did indeed grasp Cyrus’ right hand, subduing nations before him and opening doors for the sake of His beloved Israel, then no hope should ever be lost in any affliction, whether personal, national, or international. We must remember, and find refuge in the fact, that God is utterly independent of how good or bad the state gets, and how much power earthly forces may claim to clutch.

In escaping the trap concocted by the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus affirms the legitimate authority of secular rule; he also cements his status as a total boss (that’s a technical term in my theological world) by unleashing a silence-inducing comeback. The inscription on a Roman coin is all Jesus needs to assert that we must “repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.”

But if what belongs to Cyrus ultimately belongs to God, then what exactly does belong to Caesar? The Roman coin suggests a comparison between two images.

Caesar's image is printed on metal, a piece of hand-crafted currency; the image of God, on the other hand, is impressed on humanity itself, the pinnacle of God's good creation. You and I are the image, however unbelievable that may seem at times. As one ancient theologian so eloquently states, "Caesar required his image on every coin, but God has chosen the human being, whom He has created, to reflect his glory" [*Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*]. For this reason, we must not be afraid of anything that Caesar can do. For if Cyrus could be an unknowing evangelist for the Lord, the ultimate sovereign of history, then we must trust that Christ can guide us, exiles in this valley of tears, to a beautiful end beyond anything we could imagine at present. Our work lies in polishing the image of God that we are by cultivating the virtues, by ridding ourselves of the venomous taint of selfishness, by radiating joy and charity to encourage our fellow images of God to desire greater polishing as well.

Cyrus was not in view during the worst years of the Babylonian exile, and one could easily see human history as an inevitable descent into apocalyptic gloom. A more sobering expression of this point could not be found than the one given by J.R.R. Tolkien. In a letter to a fan of his books who asked him about the meaning of history, he replied, "Actually, I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory." Those are not words of despair; they imply, rather, a firm trust that in Cyrus, God gave a glimpse of final victory to a desperate people, and that a far greater man than Cyrus, the last and best messiah, will guide us home if we allow ourselves to be guided hopefully.