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Isaiah 45:1-7, Matthew 22:15-22

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel story, Jesus is clearly frustrated with the Pharisees who are questioning him. They have woven a dangerous trap for him. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" They imagine that deadly canyons fall away to either side of Jesus. If Jesus missteps in one direction, he will offend the religious authorities. If he falls in the other direction, the secular authorities. The Pharisees have brought the Herodians with them so that one side or the other can bear witness to the misstep they think Jesus is bound to make. They approach Jesus in a courteous way, but they are feigning respect. Their true motive is malice, and Jesus knows that. Jesus can see beyond their polite words into the intentions of their hearts and he calls them on it: you hypocrites!

But then, however frustrated Jesus might be with these people, he goes ahead and gives a rather gentle and reasonable answer:

Then [Jesus] said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21, RSV)

I understand that to mean, as far as goodness and piety allow, be obedient to Caesar. But from that point on, be obedient to God.

St. Paul has a similar rule in favor of obeying the secular authorities:

<sup>7</sup>Pay to all what is due them-- taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (Romans 13:7, NRSV)

That is the rule rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar.

And then St. Peter gives the other half of the rule – the rule about giving to God what is God's. When the Council forbade the apostles to teach in the name of Jesus, Peter and the other apostles boldly answered that they must obey God:

Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29, KJV)

And so it shall ever be: Christians should obey this world's authorities as best we can, but in the end we must obey God, not people.

## CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

But things are not always clear-cut when it comes to choosing for God and against others. For one thing, there is the matter of timing. There really does seem to be some wisdom in the admonition “Choose your battles.” The issue is not *whether* to serve God, but *how* to do so – how to be effective in serving him, rather than just squandering your chances.

Let me give you an example from Charles Marsh’s recent biography of the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). One summer day in 1940 Bonhoeffer and his student Eberhard Bethge (1909-2000) were sitting in a café on the Baltic coast when news reached them that France had surrendered to Germany. Everyone immediately rose to their feet in celebration and began singing the Nazi Party anthem known as the Horst Wessel Song. Charles Marsh then records this little scene:

Making a good show, Bonhoeffer joined in, shouting a triumphant “Heil Hitler” for emphasis. When Bethge objected, Dietrich leaned into him and demanded, “Are you crazy? Raise your arm!” Later, when they were alone, Bonhoeffer explained that in the days ahead they would suffer many risks for “many different things, but not for that salute!”<sup>1</sup>

I can picture this, on both sides. Bethge<sup>2</sup> was a pious young man, the son of a pastor from Saxony. He had already placed his ecclesiastical career in jeopardy by voicing support for the Confessing Church in Germany, which was opposed to the official, pro-Nazi, German Protestant Church. Having already committed himself against the German Protestant Church and its Aryan Paragraph, Bethge was not inclined to sing the Nazi anthem, nor to salute Hitler.

Bonhoeffer on the other hand had already secretly joined the resistance movement in Germany and would be hanged for it within five years. Bonhoeffer was certainly willing to pay the cost of discipleship, but not now, “not for that salute.” He did not mean to squander his life and ability to serve on this particular occasion. He was willing to choose his battle.

So, that’s interesting. One constraint on serving God rather than Caesar is to choose your battle. Don’t try to fight every battle, lest you end up accomplishing little for our Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsh, Charles (2014-04-29). *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (p. 286). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, page 235. Bethge went on to write the famous biography *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*.

## **GOD LOVES CAESAR TOO!**

But the more interesting constraint, I think, comes from remembering that God loves Caesar too! Caesar might be the Lord's competitor. You might feel that you must make a choice between God and Caesar, and you might very well be right. And yet, for all that, you should try to bear in mind that God loves Caesar and would have you love that fellow too.

That happens to be the drama of today's First Lesson, from Isaiah 45. The opening to our reading is really rather astonishing. The Lord refers to Cyrus as his "anointed":

<sup>1</sup>Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped... (Isaiah 45:1, RSV)

Cyrus is the King of Persia. He is a whole-hearted Persian, not a secret Jew, not a believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, the LORD explicitly denies that Cyrus even knows him:

<sup>5</sup>I am the LORD, and there is no other,  
besides me there is no God;  
I gird<sup>3</sup> you, though you do not know me, (Isaiah 45:5, RSV)

So, Cyrus does not know nor love the Lord. Yet the Lord knows and loves him.

Let me repeat what I have said about Cyrus: he does not know nor love the Lord. He is a Persian – probably a worshiper of ancient gods there in Iran. For all I know, he might have been a follower of Zoroastrianism. Modern scholars debate the origins of that religion, but it seems to have begun somewhere between 1100 BC – 500 BC<sup>4</sup>, so Cyrus might have known of it and been a worshiper.

In any case, Cyrus is a pagan according to the standards of Israel. Yet in Isaiah 45, the Lord refers to Cyrus by the very high title "my anointed." This was a title otherwise reserved for the kings of Israel. Its most prominent example is the shepherd boy David whom Samuel anointed to become the next king of Israel:

<sup>13</sup>Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. (1 Samuel 16:13, RSV)

Eventually, the term "my anointed" came to refer to Israel's awaited Savior-King, the Messiah. Yet, here the Lord refers to this pagan king Cyrus as his anointed.

Now, if Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been commanded to bow down and worship Cyrus's golden statue, as they had been commanded to worship

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<sup>3</sup> That is, "I install you in office, I make you king, though you do not know me."

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroaster>

the image set up by King Nebuchadnezzar, lest they be hurled into a burning, fiery furnace, those three young men would have done well to answer as they in fact answered Nebuchadnezzar:

<sup>16</sup>Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. <sup>17</sup>If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. <sup>18</sup>But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. (Daniel 3:16-18, KJV)

If ever there were a case of “rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s,” I think that the example of these three Jewish youths take the prize – until an even greater Jewish young Man renders unto Pilate the things that are Pilate’s but unto God the things that are God’s.

Still, there is a lesson for us in the Lord referring to the Persian king Cyrus as “my anointed.” It is the lesson that the Lord loves even the pagan, though the pagan knows him not. The Lord even explains *why* he loves Cyrus:

<sup>4</sup>*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. (Isaiah 45:4, RSV)

That is, the Lord loves the man because he has work for that man to accomplish – indeed he has important work for Cyrus for the sake of the Lord’s people. Cyrus might not know the Lord, but the Lord knows him and he is not done with him. He has work for Cyrus to accomplish for the upbuilding of God’s kingdom.

And the Lord loves Caesar, though Caesar knows him not. This is something to bear in mind when we are trying to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.

## **CYRUS IN YOUR LIFE?**

Is there, I wonder, a Cyrus in your life? Is there someone with power in your life who does not know Christ and who at times might want to lead you astray? Perhaps Cyrus is your boss or friends at work. Perhaps Cyrus is the weight of popular opinion. Or perhaps Cyrus is simply that one who has captured your heart, yet you recognize as one who does not know Christ. If so, remember that the Lord loves Cyrus too. You might be frustrated with Cyrus, yet try to remember that the Lord loves him, loves her.

So, when we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, let's try to do so without bitterness in our hearts. Indeed, Saint Paul's way of putting things is really lovely:

<sup>7</sup>Pay to all what is due them-- taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. <sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:7-8, NRSV)

Mind you, Saint Paul is referring to the Roman Empire when he says "taxes to whom taxes are due, respect to whom respect is due." That empire is secular and even pagan, but when we render to Caesar "the things that are Caesar's," the apostle would have us do with a spirit of love.

And when Cyrus is not some distant, secular authority, but someone in our lives, someone we must live with, then another of the old apostolic rules seems best to describe the spirit with which we render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar:

<sup>19</sup>Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: <sup>20</sup>For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. (James 1:19-20, KJV)

And so let it be with us as Saint Paul says, that we will always be found "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15, RSV).

## **JESUS BEFORE PILATE**

Finally and of most importance, let us remember the example of Jesus in rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's. When Jesus stood before Pilate, the man wondered at the silence of Jesus (John 19:9). And when Jesus did speak, he spoke the truth to Pilate, but he did not condemn Pilate to hell. Saint Peter exhorts us to follow this example of Jesus:

Fear God. Honor the emperor...<sup>21</sup>For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup>He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. <sup>23</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:17-23, RSV)

One day, we will see Cyrus, Pilate, and Caesar with the clarity and with the love with which our Maker sees them now. We cannot so honor the Caesars in our

life that we betray our Savior, and yet short of that – short of betraying Christ – we should render Caesar the honor he is due. And who knows? Perhaps we will thereby play some role in converting Caesar into a follower of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.