

OPENING COLLECT

O God, forasmuch as without you we are not able to please you; mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever Amen.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 45.1-7

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.

This is one of those passages, from Second Isaiah (40-55), which seems, very obviously, to point to the C.6th. B.C. and not to the C.8th. (1-39). King Cyrus came to power in Media and overran Persia, taking over from the Babylonians, around 550 B.C. His foreign policy, on how to keep a large empire peaceful and quell nationalism, allowed the Jews, in exile, to go home to Jerusalem. So, it is easy to see why the prophet sees him as the anointed servant of the LORD, even “though you do not know me”(v.4). The mighty power of the creator God brings the king victory on all sides, but only so that nations may know that the LORD alone is God (v.6). Cyrus obviously gives freedom to the exiles, which is good, but, even though God is ultimately in control, kings can be good and bad. Their political power is clear, but our ultimate allegiance can be called into question, which leads us to the Gospel.

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 1.1-10

¹ From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, ³ constantly 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. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of

We begin, this week, to read selections from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. This is one of his earliest letters and is full of praise for the people with their new-found faith, encouraging them to persevere in living the Christian life. The letter starts, as do all of Paul’s, with an address and a greeting. Paul praises them for their exuberant faith, which is widely known in the area, and which springs from their imitation of him and of Jesus. They ‘walk the way of Christ in the power of the Spirit’! They are therefore an example to others, says Paul, as they “serve the living God” and “wait for his Son from heaven”.

persecution

you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all

Epistle continued:

the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.
8 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. 9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

This latter phrase is a reference to the second coming, often referred to in early church writings and thought, then, to be immanent. Paul makes some qualification of it, when he writes his second letter to the Thessalonians, and by the time of the writing of Revelation things looked very different! You do not forsake the tradition but you may need to modify the way you express it.

Gospel: Matthew 22.15–22

When the chief priests and Pharisees had heard the parables, they realized that Jesus was speaking about them. 15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him 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.’
22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Matthew has recorded, faithfully, the way in which Jesus used parables to challenge the understanding of the people, concerning God and the Kingdom, and to show, as last week, how the authorities were offended at his teaching. If, however, what he said was correct, then they would have to admit that they were wrong, and needed to modify their teaching and even their way of life. Rather than do this, the Pharisees, who are cited here, set out to prove him false, or, perhaps, enslaved by the devil (Beelzebub, Matt.12.24), or a law-breaker, and so not to be trusted or believed, as a teacher or prophet. This story reveals Jesus to be ‘worldly-wise’. He knows that kings and emperors, in so far as they rule justly and care for the people (like ‘good shepherds’), are part of God’s world and his plan. So, render to Caesar ...! Being part of the political institution brings social and legal responsibilities, but being part of the religious institution brings other responsibilities. The two are separate even if they interact. We must be ready to hold on to the truth, but ready to apply that truth to a changing situation, which it may be necessary to challenge.

Post-Communion Collect:

Holy and blessed God, you have fed us with the body and blood of your Son and filled us with your Holy Spirit: may we honour you, not only with our lips but in lives dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ our Lord..