

October 18, 2020 | 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

[IS 45:1, 4-6](#)

[PS 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10](#)

[1 THES 1:1-5B](#)

[PHIL 2:15D, 16A](#)

[MT 22:15-21](#)

By Mark Peters

Most Bible scholars agree that by this point in the Book of Isaiah, the original Isaiah has been long dead, and it is clear that his dire warnings to his people have now come to pass. Because of their lack of fidelity to Yahweh, by the 580's BCE, Nebuchadnezzar had deposed their King, put their capital of Jerusalem to siege, torn down its walls, destroyed its Temple, and deported a quarter of Judah's population to captivity in Babylon. Until Hitler's Holocaust, this was the worst calamity to ever befall God's Chosen People. The shift in tone from "First Isaiah's" prophecies of doom to the "Comfort, give comfort to my people" of Chapter 40 is unmistakable.

At this time in their religious development, the Jewish people were "henotheists," people who followed one god but believed other nation's gods also existed. They thought of YHWH as literally "dwelling" in Solomon's Temple. With no Temple and thousands of miles away from home, they felt that they had truly lost all access to the Divine.

"Second Isaiah" broke new theological ground by suggesting that the God of Israel was not confined to the Temple or even Israel itself, but was truly the omnipresent Lord of the Universe. And he was about to show his power by sending them a "savior" to rescue them from their captivity. But this particular messiah, King Cyrus of Persia, did not even know that he was being so used. This "Master of the Universe" didn't know or care about the puny god of this puny nation. Cyrus understandably saw himself as controlling the shots, in command of an empire even more powerful than old Babylon.

The prophet wanted his people to know that their God was greater than even Cyrus and his gods (in fact, was the ONLY God). YHWH would use the great king for his own purposes and receive glory – through a pagan! All this did come to pass with the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the Jewish people became the world's first true monotheists.

Six centuries later, the rebuilt Temple was the scene of today's Gospel. The Pharisees and their enemies, the Herodians, temporarily join forces against Jesus, hoping to use a big dispute between them to trap him. Roman law required the payment of the census tax with the denarius coin.

Pharisees saw this as not just a tax but an act of tribute honoring the emperor and his gods, and therefore as a form of idolatry. Herodians, the "collaborators" of their day, had built a power base that depended upon the Roman occupation. Whoever he sided with, Jesus would be in trouble. If he agreed with the Pharisees, the Herodians could charge him with revoting against the Romans. If he agreed with the Herodians, the Pharisees could charge him with idolatry.

Christ's response, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God," was brilliant. He reminds us that we live in two kingdoms, at least temporarily. If "Caesar" demands the money he created, then, give it to him. But as citizens of the Kingdom of God, we must give our heavenly King what he has a right to as our Creator, namely everything we are, heart and soul.

Perhaps the Church combines these two particular readings to help us contemplate the fact that we have no power other than that which comes from God: whether the mightiest ruler or the lowliest taxpayer. Caesars come and go, empires rise and fall, but only God is in control. While "living in the material world," we are subject to many forces beyond our control, but our final allegiance is to, and our ultimate hope is in, the One who made heaven and earth.

For seekers of justice and peace, the Reign of God is "already but not yet." It is here in our midst, but will not reach its fullness until the return of the Lord. Until then, our task is to "shine like lights in the world as we hold on to the word of life," as in our Gospel Acclamation from St. Paul. And when the going gets rough, we may find also take comfort in the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Think of it, always."

Mark Peters is Director of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation for the Priests of the Sacred Heart, US Province. He has toiled in the fields of social action through the terms of six U.S. Presidents and prays like Simeon for consolation in his lifetime.