

## Weekly Reading – Monday, October 13, 2008

This is an interesting choice as the companion to the gospel lesson where the question is about "rendering unto Caesar." Here the clear focus is God's "anointing" of Cyrus the Persian king and conqueror as God's instrument, even though Cyrus is not an Israelite and does not even know Yahweh. Is the idea that there is a parallel between Cyrus and Caesar? Possible, but I think the lectionary choice works at a deeper level. In announcing that God is working through Cyrus, Isaiah affirms that Israel's God has a universal dominion. Verse 6, "I am the Lord and there is no other." Thus God can and does work through the outsider, the foreigner, through nations other than Israel. Even more to the point, all things fall under the dominion of God, the one true God. This is the principle that Jesus asserts in the gospel lesson. He leaves it to his interlocutors to figure out the application! Isaiah's great contribution here, however, is to remind God's people that God works his will in unexpected ways and through people who are not of "our group."

Isaiah 45: 1 – 7

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I Thessalonians 1: 1 – 10

As I noted above, this is the first in a series of readings from I Thessalonians which scholars suggest is among the early, if not the earliest, of Paul's letters. This actual reading is more important than it may first appear. At first glance, we have the customary greeting and words of thanksgiving and encouragement with which Paul begins most of his letters. But there is more. Attend to verse 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." The "gospel" is not simply words or a concept or a set of ideas. It is a power at work in the world with the capacity to effect change in lives and hearts and communities. It is precisely this sense of the gospel as a living power and trust in the power of the gospel to actually do things, that seems to me often lacking in the mainline Protestant churches today. I mentioned in my What's Tony Thinking? last week the work of the homiletics prof here at Emmanuel which distinguishes between preaching and proclamation. One may preach or explicate a text. Proclamation is both asserting and making palpable the power of the gospel as a living word which has the capacity to create a new reality. Throughout this short passage, that very conviction rings

through. "For we know, brothers and sisters, beloved by God that he has chosen you." Do we, in the church, today know the power of God's word? Or is our preaching more like warmed up worldly wisdom, advice, and sweet sentimentality?

Matthew 22: 15 – 22

This text with its "render unto Caesar" adage is oft-quoted, but little read or understood. As narrative, it is quite interesting and compelling. Two different Jewish groups, the reformist Pharisees and the establishment, Herodians, who normally despise each other, make common cause in their effort to entrap Jesus. On the matter of paying taxes to Caesar, each group takes the opposite position, rather like being examined regarding abortion by the "pro-life," and "pro-choice," extremes. "Give us your answer." They even try flattery. Jesus handles this with the canniness of a Zen Master. He asks them for a coin, in a sense outing the Pharisees who present themselves as not implicated in support of the Roman occupation. Then he leaves them not so much with a straightforward answer to their question as a riddle, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." But another question hangs in the air: what belongs to God? For the answer to that refer back to Isaiah 45. Everything belongs to God. You or I may render taxes and some loyalty to state or nation, but not ultimate loyalty. Ultimate loyalty belongs to God alone. In the midst of the current economic troubles, preachers may have a fresh opportunity to make such a point, as the idol, false god, of money, market and financial security has been exposed as not ultimate. Could God who worked through Cyrus the Persian conqueror be working through the economic crisis?