

**Sermon: A One-Sided Coin**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

22 October 2023

Based on **Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22**

Most of the time, our readings have something to do with salvation, how to get it or how to avoid losing it. This has been the case for at least the last three weeks. But every now and then, Scripture gives us a reminder of who is in charge of all this, and it isn't us.

Historically speaking, these later chapters in Isaiah are bringing us closer to the end of the Babylonian Exile, when God will bring the Israelites back to their own country. The same God who had judged Israel and Judah for their sins and had sent so many people into exile, was now announcing a redemptive action on their behalf.

And what God once did through David, God will now do through Cyrus, to carry out God's purpose, to rebuild God's city, and to set the people free.

Just now, we heard God speaking to Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire. In this reading, the LORD calls Cyrus his *anointed*, but that doesn't mean Cyrus is *the* Messiah. He's just anointed as would be any king or priest. In the verse before this, God calls Cyrus a shepherd (44:28). This is God's commission to Cyrus to be the one who will free Israel from Babylon, and he will do it.

God tells him, "you don't know me," which makes sense as Cyrus is a pagan in Israelite eyes, but, said God, "I am the LORD, and there is no other" – none of the idols worshiped in Assyria, Babylon, or any of the minor kingdoms in the region, nor even in Persia, mean a thing to God, not even the Roman Caesars of the future. God is the LORD and there is no other. Cyrus may not have known any of this, but God worked it out.

So, what are we to make of verse seven, where God says:

I form light and create darkness,  
I make weal and create woe;  
I the LORD do all these things.

Let's come back to that, because now seems like a good time to talk about money.

The passage from Matthew's Gospel follows immediately after last week's reading about the nasty king and the unfortunate (but unrepentant) wedding guest.

In today's reading, the Pharisees were out to trap Jesus in the things he might say. To this end, along with their disciples, they sent 'the Herodians' to ask him a question about taxes. As the name suggests, the Herodians supported Herod the Great and owed their social status to him. They would have endorsed paying the tax, when in theory, the Pharisees would not. Strange bedfellows, you might think.

The tax in question is a poll tax, also called a head tax, payable directly to Rome on an annual basis. Along with this, the people were also subject to a land tax if they were farmers (fishermen paid different kinds of taxes) and customs taxes on goods bought and sold, payable to the local tax collector.

One scholar estimated that the average man worked about three weeks per year for the state. In that economy, the people rightly felt nicked and dimed. Taxation for them was a painful symbol of conquest.

So, it was a lose-lose situation for Jesus. And, in a literal translation, this is the question they asked:

"Therefore, tell us what to you seems right. Is it permissible to *give* the poll tax to Caesar or not?"

Notice that they are not asking about the amount, but about the legality of the tax.

And Jesus said:

"*Pay* to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and pay to God what belongs to God."

There are some Greek linguistics to consider, but what Jesus advocates is *giving back* what is due, but not as a gift.<sup>1</sup> If we are to give Caesar his due – it's his face on the coin – so also, must we give God his due. What things belongs to God? All things. How much do we owe God? Everything. Sure, send Caesar his denarius. It means nothing.

For most of us today, the issue is not so much about paying our taxes, which we do all the time, as it is about paying attention to what the government is doing. What do we expect in return for our tax dollars? Simple things, maybe, like trains that run on time, or trains that run on properly sized tracks.

Scripture tells us that God is in control of history's ups and downs, whether they are good or bad from a human point of view. How, then, do we explain why bad things happen to innocent people?

When things go boom, or when the winds howl and the seas rise and people lose their homes or their lives, our first and most painful question is often directed at God: Where were you? If only you were here, my brother would not have died, as both Mary and Martha pointed out to Jesus that time when Lazarus looked very dead (John 11:1-45).

In our world, where brutal dictators still roam the earth, and people insist on making war on their neighbors and on each other, the message in Isaiah proclaims that God is the LORD and there is no other.

Earlier, we wondered what to make of the verse in which God claimed to have formed light and created darkness (45:7). In Genesis, God created light by a spoken word, but no mention was made of creating darkness, which we all presume was pre-existent. But in Isaiah, God claims to have created both; that, in fact, God created everything, the bad and the good.

So, how do we understand that verse against the backdrop of our violent world? Perhaps God was saying, “I form light for the righteous and create darkness for the unrepentant evil ones.” That would make sense. The outer darkness is where the wedding guest ended up in last week’s Gospel reading.

God the creator is also Israel’s redeemer, and our redeemer too. So, the story is coming back to being about salvation after all.

When we say God works through us, in us, and around us, we use the Cyrus story as a prime example. Cyrus did not know God, but God knew him and had a purpose for him. Cyrus had the means and the ability, but no motive, to free God’s people. Yet when God spoke to him and called him by name, he listened, and he acted.

Just as God creates darkness and evil, we can be sure that God also makes light and peace. The question of who God will commission for this task next remains open.

And for the Pharisee’s question regarding what is truly lawful, we can look forward to Jesus’ teaching on the greatest commandment. The fulfillment of the law grows out of complete devotion to God, as expressed in loving our neighbor.

Amen.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Albright, William Foxwell, and C. S. Mann. *Matthew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 273.