Sermon: There Is No Other

New North Church, Hingham

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

Today's two readings feature controversy and surprise.

The first reading is about salvation from an unexpected quarter. And therein lies the controversy: the LORD named Cyrus, king of Persia, as the people's deliverer. Previously, God said that Cyrus is 'my shepherd and he shall carry out all my purpose.' (Isaiah 44:28)

God calls Cyrus 'anointed' but that doesn't mean *Messiah* here; it just means he has been commissioned as God's chosen instrument – temporarily.

God also promised to go before him, and that alone will ensure Cyrus' success.

So, how is this controversial at all?

Isaiah's people and future scholars couldn't accept that God would choose a foreigner as the people's promised redeemer. The guy was not Jewish; he did not worship Israel's God; and he was loyal only to his own gods. He also had no idea that he was about to fulfill God's will. But for one shining moment, he was the instrument that God would use to deliver Israel from Babylon. Cyrus was the means by which God would intervene in the events of the world.[1]

That notion had people scratching their heads. No other foreign ruler in the Bible had ever been described as anointed or as a shepherd. Way back, God called an Assyrian king 'the rod of my anger' (10:5), but that was a call for destruction, not salvation.[2]

From this, we learn that while God remains hidden, the divine presence can influence events. Why *not* use Cyrus if it gets the job done?

None of this should be a big surprise. In Exodus, when Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he asked the LORD what he should say to the people if they wanted to know who send him. God said to tell them, 'I AM WHO I AM,' one of many alternative translations, but my favorite is, 'I AM THE ONE WHO MAKES THINGS HAPPEN.'[3]

And good things happened through Cyrus.

Our second reading from Matthew's Gospel is like math: the story is cumulative, as we're picking up where we left off last week. It is meant to remind us of where our true loyalty should lie. On the face of it, it's a question about paying taxes, but Jesus goes way beyond that, in a very subtle way.

Jesus had been speaking mainly to some Pharisees, and today Matthew tells us that though they have gone away, they had sent some of their disciples 'along with the Herodians' to entrap Jesus in what he might say next.

The only Herod around at this point in Jesus' career was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. That Herod was the one who heard the news about the birth of Jesus.

We can think of the Herodians as upper-class Galileans in favor of the Romans. One scholar called them the Pharisees' 'sidekicks.'[4] They are only mentioned three times in the Gospels; twice in Mark[5] and once in Matthew. So, why are they here and only here in the story? Perhaps the Pharisees wanted to use them as witnesses against Jesus.

When they asked, is it *lawful* to pay taxes to the emperor or not, Jesus told them to show him the coin used for the tax, and they brought him a denarius.

What could you buy with one denarius?

Well, eight loaves of bread, the ration for twelve days. Or a three-night stay in a tavern with three meals included. And according to Matthew 20:2, a farm worker earned one denarius per day.[6] One did not part with a denarius lightly.

Every Jew had to pay this tax, rich or poor, from age 14 or so to age 65.

But to whom do you pay it, to which emperor? In Jesus' time, that was Tiberius.

Imagine a tiny silver coin picturing the emperor crowned with laurel on one side, which read *Emperor Tiberius, august Son of the divine Augustus*. The other side read *Pontifex Maximus* ('most high priest').

Paying this tax with this coin subordinated Jews to Rome, and it was a symbol of Rome's power over them. The Zealots refused to pay; the Pharisees did so reluctantly.

Jesus did not have a coin in his pocket but someone in the Pharisees' group did. Remember that Jesus was teaching in the Temple, where the image of the emperor on the coin was offensive. Pulling one out to show it to Jesus was hypocritical to say the least.

At worst, it meant that they were in solidarity with Rome and against Jesus. That coin had a claim on their loyalty to Rome. And it gave Rome authority over them.

Rather than answer *yes* or *no*, Jesus said to 'give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.'

What, then, are 'the things that are God's?' In the light of Jesus' ministry, God wants the faith and repentance of those who believe the kingdom of heaven is near.[7] It means to offer Jesus the discipleship he asked for when he said, 'follow me.'[8] And for those who take in Jesus' teaching, it means to be obedient to God's will, and to worship and pray and behave as people of the kingdom.

Loyalty to God comes before loyalty to Caesar. Caesar and God are not on an equal footing.

The question asked of Jesus was, in essence, a trap, in the same way the devil tried to trap Jesus that time in the wilderness.[9] Back then, Jesus said, 'Worship the LORD your God, and serve only him.'[10]

Opposing allegiances can force us to choose between success or integrity, for example. Unethical behavior might benefit us today but make us feel rotten tomorrow.

In Nazi Germany, clergy opposed to Hitler would risk their lives to render to God what is God's by offering forbidden sacraments in outlawed religious services.

Making difficult choices is often what life is all about for many people. Choosing God over all else can be a difficult choice when you're afraid.

Back in the 1960s, a popular television series called *F Troop* was on the air for a few seasons, which some of us may remember fondly. The cast of characters included an indigenous-persons tribe, called the Hekawi.

One of the tribesmen was said to have the unique ability to find lost things. The chief explained that that was because he found them before they were lost.

The LORD is 'THE ONE WHO MAKES THINGS HAPPEN.' Scripture tells us that God has the unique ability to predict the future and that may be because God enables future events before predicting them.

Every one of us is stamped with the image of God. We belong to God and no other. God would be happy to change the world for the good through any of us, ready or not. We all remember what God anointed Cyrus to do.

Amen.

[1] Brevard S. Childs. *Isaiah*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 353.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Exodus 3:13-15. Some alternatives: 'I AM;' 'I AM WHAT I AM;' 'He who causes to be;' and 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.' See also Exodus 33:19.
[4] John P. Meier. "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians", *Journal of Biblical Literature,* Vol. 119, No. 4 (Winter, 2000), pp. 740-746.
[5] Mark 3:6; 12:13.
[6] Peter Lampe, Proper 24, 15.
[7] Matthew 4:17.
[8] Matthew 4:18-22.
[9] Matthew 4:8-10.
[10] Deuteronomy 6:13.