

## Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; 1Thessalonians 1:1-5b; and Matthew 22:15-21

What kind of role should our religious beliefs play in our political decisions? While the 2020 election is certainly a referendum on the moral character of our nation, we need to attend to another equally significant aspect of our nation's moral health, viz. how can we become able to work together again, with all that entails, compromise, respect and forgiveness. Has our focus on particular platforms, no matter how righteous, made us lose sight of that other pillar of spiritual life, ongoing surrender to God's will? We are challenged this Sunday to examine these questions.

Isaiah 45 presents a world in which God is completely in charge. The Babylonian Empire is looking like it will soon fall to the Persians. In about fifteen years, the Persian army, led by Emperor Cyrus the Great, will defeat Babylon and send the exiled Israelites home in 538 BCE. God declares repeatedly that God, not the Persian gods, is the source of Cyrus' awesome might: "I am the Lord and there is no other." God chose Cyrus to accomplish the return from exile. We find comfort in knowing that God's will will be done, no matter what. However, this is also deeply disturbing. Is God on the side of some people and not of others, whom we can then demonize? We tie ourselves in angry spiritual knots, insisting all God's values are identical with ours and failing to live in the unity for which Jesus prayed at the Last Supper. Haven't we experienced God as more complex than this? We have to wrestle with this, because we have been charged since Creation to represent God's compassion and faithful love to one another.

The gospel continues to encourage wrestling with this spiritual conundrum. Jesus rejects easy answers as he verbally duels with the Herodians and Pharisees. The Herodians had made the reality of Roman oppression work for them: Herod, a non-Jew, had wheedled his way into a kingship over Israel and his followers continued to work with the Romans to maintain wealth and power, at the cost of Jewish freedom. The Pharisees on the other hand chafed under Roman rule; only God could truly rule them. But they were just as messed up as the Herodians because their real concern was power. They thought their fastidious following of the commandments gave them a superior knowledge of God's will, but they only knew their own wills. Now both Herodians and Pharisees hear Jesus calling out their motives. He has been telling parables that urge a deep life of discipleship – with values aligned with God's, producing good works for God and accepting God's invitation to live in hope. So these enemies set a trap for their common enemy, Jesus.

What does Jesus' response to their trap mean? It has been interpreted to mean that religion and politics are mutually exclusive. Religion is not practical in the "real world." It has also been interpreted to justify unjust leaders and destructive policies. Recall, for example, the divine right of kings or manifest destiny. Jesus' answer has also been interpreted to mean that we must withdraw from the world in order to be holy, like a monk or a nun. However, in light of what Jesus teaches elsewhere, "Give to Caesar Caesar's things and to God God's things," means that we cannot avoid our reality. Our lives take place in history and involve complex social systems and our lives take place simultaneously in God. The Herodians have missed the boat because they blatantly separated God from life. The Pharisees have likewise gone astray because they created an overly simplified view of life – follow the rules perfectly and all will be well – and in doing so lost the compassion of God.

In his pithy saying, Jesus gives no guidance on what belongs to whom or how one gives it. This becomes a disciple's lifelong quest. In 1Thes, Paul talks about the "work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope;" notice the work involved! Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian whom the Nazis executed in 1945, wrote, "I am still discovering right up to this moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By "this-worldliness," I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures. In so doing, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith." Our path in 2020: easy answers are out; the struggle to find God's will is in.

- ❖ For the Pharisee in you: tell God your ideas for solving an injustice. Ask God to show you what's missing in your plan.
- ❖ For the Herodian in you: What part of life have you blocked God from entering?