

Minted in Christ (A Sermon for Proper 24A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Isaiah 45:1-7

October 22, 2017

King Cyrus is the Persian emperor who is invited by God to play a key role in the story of God's presence in the world. Cyrus doesn't know God, or have any idea of playing a role in God's plan for salvation. We are introduced to Cyrus through the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through iron bars, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name."

God's motive was freedom from bondage and a new opportunity to rebuild the community. Cyrus' motive was expanding his territory by military might and increasing the kingdom over which he reigned. How could God rely on someone like that to further God's intention?

Once again, we are reminded, God works in mysterious ways. Cyrus, someone who did not know or worship God, was to be the messiah - *the messiah* - for the captive people of Israel. Historical evidence showed that Cyrus was interested in plenty of religions, plenty of Gods. He was decidedly not a follower of Yahweh. Regardless, God used him in a mighty way.

The division between "the world," which Cyrus wanted to conquer and control, and "God's kingdom," which God wanted to restore, came face to face. And maybe there isn't much of a distinction, after all?

For the people of God, their only hope was a foreign war lord who was going to kill a lot of people in order to set some free.

Into this picture of God's presence in the world comes a confrontation in Matthew's gospel that sheds some light on this supposed struggle between "the world" and "God's kingdom."

During Jesus' final days in Jerusalem, his opponents devise a question that is intended to trap him either in disloyalty to Jewish tradition or subversion against Rome. The Pharisees and Herodians, supporters of the emperor and strange bedfellows for observant religious Pharisees, try to throw Jesus off by first praising him. "Teacher, we know you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.....you do not show partiality. Tell us, now, what do you think, 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?'"

Sometimes, usually every April, I wish Jesus had declared taxes to be an abomination to God.

Instead Jesus understood the motive of his questioners, "Why are you putting me to the test?" I think it is helpful to know, prior to this questioning Jesus had overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple and addressed the issue of the temple tax. The tax in question was levied by the Roman emperor on all the inhabitants of occupied lands. This tax had to be paid in Roman currency. The amount of the tax was a denarius, representing the average daily wage of a laborer.

Jesus asked for the coin that was used to pay the tax. Stamped on the coin was the likeness of Caesar, likely with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, high priest."

When Jesus asked whose image was on the coin the answer obviously was "the emperor's." So Jesus turns the table on those who questioned and puts himself in the position of

the one asking the question. His answer then to the original question becomes a command, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s....”

The coin was minted by the emperor so give it back to the emperor. The genius of Jesus’ answer is in the remainder of his statement. “Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” What belongs to God? His listeners all knew that all of creation belonged to God.

Each and every one of them was created in the likeness and image of God, therefore God had a claim on all of their lives. Giving back to God means returning all they had and who they were to the source of life, total allegiance heart, mind, soul to God.

You and I have been created in the image of God with the capacity to love, to be loved, and to be creative. That image was affirmed in baptism when we were signed with the sign of the cross and told, “You are marked as Christ’s own, forever.”

Sometimes that image is difficult to see in others or even ourselves. When we look at each other we tend to see the image our commercial world stamps on us. We are known not for who we are but what we do. We are known by where we live, what we wear, the company we keep.

Nevertheless there is a much deeper stamp upon each of us. A stamp that says you are important for who you are, not what you do. You are important because you are a child of God sealed with the sign of the cross – the sign of Christ who stands behind each of us in full faith and credit.

Because each of us is stamped with the image of God we can afford to be not just a friendly church but an open church.

We can afford to be who we say we are, a church that welcomes all those created in the image of God no matter what you do for a living, where you live, what clothes you put on, or who you decide to hang out with.

We can afford to consider new ways of welcoming, new ways of living, and new ways of sharing the love of God, based on the gifts we can each offer.

We can afford to be open and invite the gifts of all who come among us so everyone has an opportunity to share in the ministries in which we are engaged to the glory of God and benefit of all whose lives we touch.

I believe we can afford to give to God that which is God's: our hearts, our souls, our resources, our abilities, our time.

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But give to God the things that are God's, the only gift that God wants...our whole life.

Amen.