

29th Sunday (2020)
(Isa 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thes 1:1-5b; Matt 22:15-21)

People who love the Bible and are familiar with it, universally love the second part of Isaiah, called Deutero-Isaiah. If any part of the Bible (aside from the gospel) can be called “good news,” this is it. Without going into a lot of detail, it is enough to say that it is addressed to the people of Israel, now exiled in Babylon for their sins; the “good news” is that they are soon to be delivered, allowed to go back to their homes. (We might say it would be the equivalent of a message to us, right now, that the pandemic is about to end and that things will soon get back to normal.) Could we think of anything better?

But in the process of delivering this good news, the prophet teaches us much about Israel’s God, the God we worship. It is to God, of course, that this deliverance is attributed, but God, as so often, works through natural, human means. This is in accord with what we call the incarnational dimension of divine activity. God is Lord of all the world, the nations are His to use. When the northern kingdom of Israel was to be punished for idolatry and oppression of the poor, Assyria was God’s instrument. Isaiah had said, “Ah, Assyria, my rod in anger, my staff in wrath. Against an impious nation I send him.” Punishment was needed, so the Lord chose the Assyrians, a violent people, whose policy was to deport populations of those they conquered, so the northern kingdom of Israel was effectively brought to an end. But in the present case, the human agent is Cyrus,

King of Persia. God did not directly instruct him to deliver Israel, of course, but God knew the man and his policies. Rather than deport populations as the Assyrians and Babylonians had done, Cyrus wanted to earn their trust by treating them humanely.

Deutero-Isaiah knew that Israel's deliverance, return, and a glorious future had been foretold by the prophets, and he drew on this knowledge to develop his message. We think of Israel's faith as monotheistic, but basically it was till then only a matter of worshiping their Lord alone, not rejecting the existence of other gods. Even the first commandment says only, "you shall not have other gods besides me" (Exod 20:3). But Deutero-Isaiah preaches a monotheism that rejects pagan gods as simply nonexistent in a way not seen before in the OT. Statements such as "I am the first and the last; there is no God but me" (44:6) are common.

These themes are all tied together.

The fact that Yhwh has foretold these things is presented as proof—it's not because God foreknew them, but because He brings them to pass.

The prophet condemns idolatry: he speaks of those who use silver and gold to make a god; they set it in place, from which it cannot move, cannot hear or answer a prayer. It reminds one of the psalm:

**'Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of human hands.**

**They have mouths but do not speak
Eyes but do not see.**

Their makers shall be like them,

all who trust in them” (Ps 115:4-5, 8).

We fast-forward to NT times. We know the God we worship is the same Lord of heaven and earth: all things lie in His power and so we always trust, as long as we do what is right, and the gospel has a message for us. As so often, Jesus is being challenged by the Pharisees, hoping to entrap Him: they considered paying the Roman tax wrong, as acknowledging a foreign pagan sovereignty over Israel; but the Herodians are also present, people from the opposite pole. In spite of their flattery, Jesus avoids endorsing either party. “Whose image and inscription is this?” He asks; then tells them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God, the things that are Gods.”

We usually content ourselves by noting how adroitly Jesus avoided this trap, but in fact the second member of His reply is the most important point of all today’s readings: we are to render to God what is His. The coin may bear Caesar’s image, but we are made in the image and likeness of God, and so we are to give ourselves to Him. How do we do that? First of all, by loving the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and our neighbor as ourself. Do we truly make these our priority? I was delighted to learn just recently, thanks to Abbot James, that very early the motto of St. Anselm’s Abbey was, as shown on our letterhead, “et quae sunt Dei Deo,” “and what is God’s to God”—hopefully it still is our motto.

In these election days, with billionaires galore and millions of dollars spent simply on TV ads, we are forced

to remember, “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands; their makers shall be like them.” A message from Our Holy Father Pope Francis of Aug. 27 is aptly headed, “Economy must place people above ‘idols of finance’.”

We have to remember that decisions lead to consequences; when the wealthy in Israel oppressed the poor, contrary to the pleading of the prophets, they were crushed by Assyria. When Judah revolted against the Babylonians, in spite of the warnings of Jeremiah, they were sent into exile. Our Holy Father Pope Francis saw climate change a matter so urgent and pressing that he issued the encyclical, Laudato Si, a warning and a plea. We have so failed to address the issue that we see record destruction by floods on the one hand and by forest fires on the other. We now have the United Nations, neither religious or Democrat or Republican, seeing natural disasters more than doubling in the last 20 years and warning “that the world risks becoming an ‘uninhabitable hell’ for millions unless leaders take climate action.” Yet this is only a sideline in the current debates.

Our God is Lord of the universe and can intervene to save us, but if our reality is truly incarnational, as we believe, we should not expect that. In the beginning was the big bang and through billions of year the universe evolved naturally, and also the human race, and so we are where we are now. Where do we go from here? Jesus taught us to pray “thy kingdom come.” The arrival of God’s kingdom means the end of all enmity,

hatred, division. How can this come about? By all of us giving to God His due, by loving Him with all our whole heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and loving our neighbor as ourself.