

Year A 29th Sunday Ordinary Time
Is 45:1, 4-6; Ps 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10; 1 Thes 1:1-5b; Mt 22:15-21

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This Sunday's readings require some explanation, because I would suppose that the first reading from Isaiah, for example, is not easily understood by most of the people who will hear it in church, and so its connection with the Gospel might be missed. This part of Isaiah was written in the closing days of the Babylonian exile, around 540 B.C. The prophet is a keen observer of the international scene, and sees that a new empire, that of the Persians, will defeat the neo-Babylonians or Chaldeans, and implement a new policy of liberation: the exiles will be able to go back home and rebuild their lives! This is truly "Good News" (Is 40:9; 52:7; 61:1). It was the great Isaiah who had explained to the Jews in exile that their defeat at the hands of the neo-Babylonians had not been due to Yahweh's weakness vis-à-vis the Babylonian deities, but was because of their sins. After much suffering (Isaiah calls it "paying double" in 40:2), the people have repented and are ready to start a new life. In fact, Yahweh, the God of Israel, can redeem them because he is the creator and the Lord of history. All kings are under his rule, and only do what he allows them to do for his own purposes. Thus Cyrus, the great Persian king, has been anointed for his task by Yahweh so that he can, even unknowingly, fulfill Yahweh's plan.

In Jesus' day, the Jewish people were still ruled by foreigners, the Romans. It would not be long before they would rebel, in 66 A.D., as futile as this would be against that great empire. There were three different positions regarding the paying of taxes to these colonial oppressors: the leftist revolutionaries (later called Zealots) held that taxes shouldn't be paid. For the rightist Sadducees, the rich priestly aristocracy in "cahoots" with the Romans, taxes were ok (I don't know if they availed themselves of loopholes!). The centrist Pharisees said taxes should not have to be paid (see Jesus' own position in Mt 17:24-27, valid for both temple and Roman taxation), but paid them to avoid greater evils. It is in this setting that the Pharisees seek to entrap Jesus: might he be a revolutionary who says taxes shouldn't be paid (he was accused of that in Luke 23:2). Jesus may not be a "revolutionary," but he is radical: coins belong to the earth and its

rulers, and are not to be identified with God. And Caesar is not God: that was a radical statement, as Christians were to learn when persecuted by the Roman empire for this belief.