

**29th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Is 45:1, 4-6; Ps 96; 1 Thes 1:1-5b; Mt 22:15-21**

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This Sunday's readings are timely, in that they refer to the political realm, as viewed in the Bible. The first reading from Isaiah is remarkable, in that a pagan king, the great Cyrus of Persia, is called "messiah" (meaning "anointed"). The setting of this passage is important. The Jews have been in exile in Babylon for some 49 years (from about 587 to 538 B.C.E.). The anonymous prophet of the late exile whom we call "Second Isaiah" proclaims the "Good News" that the exile is about to end, that the people have paid double for their sins, that God is going to come as their shepherd and gather them and take them back to the Promised Land, Is 40:1-11. But the instrument for this saving act of liberation will be a pagan, Cyrus (in Hebrew, *kores*, badly misappropriated by that David of Waco, Texas notoriety). Cyrus doesn't even know Yahweh, but Yahweh will use him as his instrument of salvation. The Persians had a different policy towards their conquered peoples than the Babylonians: these had deported the Jews to Babylon; the Persians were more enlightened and thought that the Jews would prosper (and pay their taxes and tributes to the Persians!) better in their own soil. Cyrus even supported the Jewish religion, returning the stolen temple objects and subsidizing the rebuilding of the temple, 2 Chr 36:22; Ezr 1; 7:11-26.

The gospel reading is thought-provoking: is there a realm which belongs to "Caesar" and another, separate realm, with which God is concerned? Jesus historically must be situated among "messianic" movements, that is, by acting as the hoped-for descendant of David ("Son of David," see e.g., Lk 1:32; Mt 2; 21:1-10; Mk 10:47-48), he exposed himself to charges of crimes against the majesty of the emperor by being considered an unauthorized king in the Roman empire (Jesus fled one such attempt to "make him king" in Jn 6:15). Jesus was even accused of prohibiting the paying of taxes to Rome, Lk 23:2; cf. Mt 17:24-27. Thus, he had to be careful about the trap being set for him (though eventually he would be arrested, tried and executed as an unlawful "King of the Jews").

Jesus' answer must be read on multiple levels. Many Caesars were deified, turned into gods, usually after death, some even while still living. To distinguish between Caesar and God, as Jesus does here, is driving a point: Caesar (the state, one's country) is not God. There are different views of how Christians must view the state. Rom 13:1-7 goes out of its way to support Rome, the state which would eventually behead Paul! The Book of Revelation, however, reflects a situation where the Roman state persecutes and ostracizes Christians, and has only the bitterest contempt for what it calls "the beast" (the number 666 is said to stand for "Nero Caesar," Rev 13:11-18).