



“Heads or Tails?”

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, October 17–18, 2020
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We’ve got two lessons today that at first read really don’t appear to have anything in common with one another. Isaiah is who talking about some dude named Cyrus, and what a great guy he is. And Matthew, where Jesus is yammering on Caesar. They almost seem like two side to the same coin. What do either of these have to do with the other, though?

Did you pay attention to that opening line in our Isaiah lesson? Did you catch to whom it was addressed?

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, Isaiah is saying that the Lord God is about to say something to a guy named Cyrus. Maybe you recognize that word, anointed. Maybe you vaguely remember that anointed means “messiah.” So maybe you’re thinking that Cyrus is probably some faithful Jewish king that God is about to say something nice about. Except . . . that’s not who Cyrus is.

Cyrus is a Persian. He is not a follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is, however, the guy that kicked the butts of the Babylonians. It was the Babylonians who besieged Jerusalem; razed its walls; destroyed the temple Solomon had built; and carted off the ruling political and religious leaders to live three hundred miles to the east of Jerusalem in Babylon. The Lord God allowed the downfall of Jerusalem & the exile of the leadership to happen, because the people of Israel had - once again - fallen away from worshiping The Lord. They refused to listen to Jeremiah and the other prophets who had warned them again and again and again and again to return to following the Lord. So God allowed the Babylonians to come in and haul them away. It was only after decades in exile; decades of repentance and prayer and supplication, that God finally listened to their pleas. That’s where Cyrus comes into play.

Cyrus comes into power, and he restores all the exiled peoples to their homelands. He allows for the worship of their native gods. Even more, Cyrus tells the Israelites that he will pay for the reconstructing of Jerusalem out of the Persian coffers. Cyrus allows the city walls to be restored. He gives them permission them go through the Babylonian vaults looking for all the religious items - bowls, and cups, and whatever else - that were taken from the temple decades ago. Admittedly, not everyone returns. After seven decades in one place, people have become accustomed to their new home, so it shouldn't be surprising that some people wanted to stay.

But enough return in order to bring the city of Jerusalem back to life. It wasn't a Jewish king that brought about the rebirth of Jerusalem. It wasn't a new judge that God raised up from among the people. It wasn't a descendant of Abraham who lead the rebuilding. No. The Savior, the Anointed, the Messiah, of the Israeli people was some foreign, pagan, warrior, king that the Lord God lifted up and used to lead the Israelites home. It's Cyrus that Isaiah is calling God's Anointed. Yet, by calling Cyrus God's Anointed, Isaiah is throwing some serious shade on all the Jewish leadership, both political and religious.

Flip a coin - whose side ya gonna be on? Heads I win; tails, you lose. That's the Isaiah lesson.

Now, for Matthew's lesson, we need to flash forward several hundred years. Jerusalem is no longer destroyed. The temple has not only been rebuilt, but it's getting some much-needed renovations under the reign of King Herod. The whole country is currently under the long arm of the Roman Empire, and, surprisingly to those who hate the occupying government, Jerusalem is doing pretty okay, financially. It's still right along the major land route from Europe & Asia on the way to the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa.

Another positive is, the religious leadership is not off in exile hundreds of miles away. However, they're not really serving the good of the people. The religious leaders are split into two primary groups, one called Pharisees and the other called Sadducees. They appear to be far more interested in following the 600-plus rules of the Law of Moses rather than actually following God. Along comes some guy, upsetting the cart; rocking the boat; and causing problems. Worse, this relatively new guy is not even someone from the inside. He's not a professional religious leader. Rather, he's from the working class. He's the son of a carpenter. He's stirring the pot, getting people to think on their own and question the religious rules, rather than blindly follow, and sheepishly obey.

The Pharisees may not enjoy the fact that the Romans are running the government, but like many of us right now, the Pharisees don't have control over very much of their lives at all. They have so little bit of power and control, that they hold onto what they do have Very

Tightly. They felt that Jesus was threatening to take that power and control away. Jesus, though, knows the reality that none of us is in charge.

The Pharisees and Sadducees have been attempting to trip him up for months, if not years. So, they ask him a money question. They ask him about paying the Roman government tax. The reason this is a big deal is that what will happen if Jesus says

Yes, pay the tax - is then they can cry out that Jesus is supporting the occupational government, and is therefore working against the Jewish people.

Or, if Jesus says No, don't pay the tax, then they can claim he is raising sedition, attempting to get the people to revolt against the Roman government.

Flip a coin, heads I win, tails, you lose, sucker!

Jesus, though, doesn't play their game. He almost ignores the question and gives them an answer unrelated to what they were asking.

We are heading into contentious times (Thank You, Captain Obvious). We have extremism in our two major political parties, which I, personally, feel have been growing farther and farther apart, both of them ignoring the majority of the people and focusing only on the loudest of the people, for several decades now. We keep trying to "get" those with whom we disagree. We want to trip up our enemies, embarrass those whose views we hold to be unpalatable. We tend to think there are only two sides to the coin, that there are only two points of view to any topic: the right way, and the wrong way. That there is my view, and there is your view; and my view is correct, and your view is simply, flat out, wrong.

I came across this quote while preparing this message - it's a little long, please bear with me:

I can't recall humanity being more divided. Plenty of folks are sad and scared and angry and there are sound bites being fed to us that seem fueled by judgment, fear and even hatred. . ."

"If there is any hope for all of us to move forward, to heal and to grow -- we have got to learn to engage people who are different from us with dignity and with love. ... We care about you for the simple fact that you are a person, our neighbor on planet Earth. It's not about what color your skin is, how much money you have in the bank, your political affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, nationality or faith."

Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? it's things that I have thought, but not always said out loud, especially from the pulpit What struck me most about that quote, is that it comes, not from a celebrated political person, or from a well-known theologian, or even from a famous actor; it was Chip Gaines, the husband half of the tv home remodeling show Fixer Upper. The Gaines' had found themselves in a bit of hot water a few years ago because the church they were attending had some viewpoints that weren't popular. The Gaines', to their credit I feel, did Not take a stand for or against their church or their pastor. Rather, they took a stance that spoke positively to their character. They pointed out the very basic fact that humans are rarely going to agree on everything, so we have to learn to get along with one another.

I had a professor in seminary who, in our discussion on the nature of God, told us that we had to choose our heresy. He explained that we limited, finite human beings can never fully know and understand an infinite and all-knowing God. With our understanding always being limited, we will, in some way or the other, always be wrong in how we think of God, Therefore, we must choose to understand God to the best of our abilities, all the while knowing that it will, somehow, be incorrect.

You know, I realize now that earlier I misspoke. We are not heading into contentious times; we are IN contentious times. We have politicians of all stripes failing to live up to the good of the country. We as a people have allowed ourselves to become fractured and divided. We are not working for the good of the country or the good of all citizens; too often, we are working only toward the good of our own point of view, and not allowing the freedom of a different way of thinking.

Unless we as a nation, unless we as a people, change our ways, and become willing to listen, willing to hear, other points of view; until we are willing to help those who are different from us in language or skin color or abilities or orientation or country of origin or WHATEVER it is that we think divides us - If we do not begin listening to one another, then I truly fear that it will be: heads, no one wins, tails, we all lose.

Sisters and Brothers, in the name of Christ, we can all rise above this.

Amen.