

Several weeks ago, the gospel of the 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time raised the question as to why Jesus taught in parables. Did he use them to disclose the truth or to disguise it? Both points of view are found in the gospel. Today we might wonder about the reply Jesus gives to his hostile questioners about paying taxes to Caesar. Is he really answering the question or is he being cleverly evasive?

Either way, his response, like the parables, opens the way to reflection and debate. No one has a monopoly on the "right way" for Christian persons and communities to relate to secular authority. There are innumerable variations on this theme. It's easy enough to say that Christians are called to respect and obey lawful authority while living out the radical demands of the gospel. How that plays out in the public forum and in the market place in vastly different societies around the globe is another.

Australian Christians are not exempt from the challenge of this dilemma. But like the Thessalonians of old they too are blessed with Good News "not only as words, but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction".

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

45:1, 4-6

First Reading

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whom he has taken by his right hand
to subdue nations before him
and strip the loins of kings,
to force gateways before him
that their gates be closed no more:

It is for the sake of my servant Jacob,
of Israel my chosen one,
that I have called you by your name,
conferring a title though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, unrivalled;
there is no other God besides me.
Though you do not know me, I arm you
that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun
that, apart from me, all is nothing.

It may surprise some to discover that a pagan ruler, the Persian king Cyrus, is named by God as "his anointed", his "messiah". Cyrus is the only non-Israelite in the entire Old Testament to be addressed in this way.

Today's text from the prophet Isaiah explains why. God has mysteriously chosen Cyrus to be his agent. The Persian Empire founded by Cyrus has superseded Babylonian rule. He is therefore commissioned by God to return the Israelites from exile to their homeland.

The reading falls into two halves. In the first the prophet Isaiah announces that the God of Israel is the real power behind Cyrus' throne. The new king's military success and rise to imperial status is attributed entirely to God. This pronouncement paves the way for the Lord's direct address to Cyrus.

The second half discloses the true nature of Cyrus' role as God's instrument. God's purpose is twofold. In the first place, it is to restore the fortunes of "my servant Jacob . . . Israel my chosen one". More importantly, it is so that all people "may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that, apart from me, all is nothing".

These are grand themes that need to be delivered with a certain gravity. The crux of the whole passage is found in the declaration, "I am the Lord, unrivalled; there is no other God besides me". Readers need to ensure this claim is given the emphasis it deserves. For an inclusive language text, turn to the NRSV.

It is worth noting that the gospel never suggests that Caesar is an agent of God's purpose, much less that he is a "messiah".

Responsorial Psalm

The responsorial psalm reinforces the message of the first reading. Psalm 95/96 is a hymn of praise calling all to honour Israel's God as Lord of all the earth and king of all nations. The response – "Give the Lord glory and honour" – is taken directly from the psalm.

The tone of the entire psalm is celebratory. Each verse in turn repeats the theme that God alone is God, reigning in splendour over the whole of creation and all the peoples of the earth, judging everything justly.

The verses are all of standard four-line length and contain no unusual or difficult words. Readers should be able to proclaim this with confidence and in a joyful spirit.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 95:1, 3-5, 7-10

R. Give the Lord glory and honour.
O sing a new song to the Lord,
sing to the Lord all the earth.
Tell among the nations his glory
and his wonders among all the peoples. R.
The Lord is great and worthy of praise,
to be feared above all gods;
the gods of the heathens are naught.
It was the Lord who made the heavens. R.
Give the Lord, you families of peoples,
give the Lord glory and power,
give the Lord the glory of his name.
Bring an offering and enter his courts. R.
Worship the Lord in his temple,
O earth, tremble before him.
Proclaim to the nations: 'God is king,'
He will judge the peoples in fairness. R.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians

1:1-5

From Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the Church in Thessalonika which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; wishing you grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all, and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know, brothers, that God loves you and that you have been chosen, because when we brought the Good News to you, it came to you not only as words, but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction.

Second Reading

From today until the feast of Christ the King the second reading is taken from the oldest book of the New Testament. Paul's first letter to the Christian community at Thessalonika was written about the year 51, some two decades after the death of Jesus.

At that stage, expectations were very high that the Messiah was about to return in glory. Paul has to counsel the Thessalonians to be patient and vigilant. This focus on the second coming explains the choice of the letter for these final weeks of the liturgical year. The gospel readings will increasingly deal with the "end times".

Today's passage consists of the very first verses of the letter. It begins with a greeting from the authors and from "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". It continues with a prayer of thanksgiving (reported indirectly) that brings together for the first time the now familiar triad of faith, hope and love. The third part of the reading conveys Paul's warm approval for the Thessalonians because they allowed the Good News to come to them "as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction."

Readers may wish to check the pronunciation of Thessalonika beforehand. Otherwise they should ready themselves to proclaim this positive and attractive text with Paul's own affection.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 22:15-21

The Pharisees went away to work out between them how to trap Jesus in what he said. And they sent their disciples to him, together with the Herodians, to say, 'Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, 'You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for me? Let me see the money you pay the tax with.' They handed him a denarius, and he replied, 'Whose head is this? Whose name?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. He then said to them, 'Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.'

Gospel

What attitude should the new Christian movement have toward the Roman Empire? Should it accept and submit to the power of pagan Rome? Or should it challenge the very basis on which the Empire was founded – the quasi-divine status of Caesar and his military might? Should it run the risk of being branded a subversive organisation that threatened Rome with radical teachings and practices?

These were real and difficult questions for Christian communities long after Jesus' death and resurrection. Good reason for them to keep returning to this brief exchange between Jesus and his adversaries. In effect there are two animosities operative here. One is the smouldering hostility between Roman overlords and Jewish nationalists, each demanding allegiance in one form or another. The other is the hostility now flaring up between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. As the story is told Jesus negotiates his way through this minefield with consummate ease. What to make of his answer in practice is another matter.

The reading has all the elements of a tiny one-act play with three actors: the story-teller, the religious leaders and Jesus. The inherent drama of the interaction should be easy to communicate without becoming too theatrical.