

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Thus says the Lord to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him —
and the gates shall not be closed:
“For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know,
from the rising of the sun and from the west,
that there is no one besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.”



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A reading from the first letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
to the Church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.
We always give thanks to God for all of you
and mention you in our prayers,
constantly remembering before our God and Father
your work of faith and labour of love
and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God,
that he has chosen you,
because our message of the gospel
came to you not in word only,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit
and with full conviction.



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – A 29

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord

The Pharisees went and plotted
to entrap Jesus in what he said.
So they sent their disciples to him,
along with the Herodians, saying,
“Teacher, we know that you are sincere,
and teach the way of God in accordance with truth,
and show deference to no one;
for you do not regard people with partiality.
Tell us, then, what you think.
Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”
But Jesus, aware of their malice, said,
“Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?
Show me the coin used for the tax.”
And they brought him a denarius.
Then he said to them,
“Whose head is this, and whose title?”
They answered, “Caesar’s.”
Then he said to them,
“Give therefore to the Caesar the things that are the Caesar’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

Reading I: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

In Second Isaiah we find a remarkable treatment of the Persian emperor Cyrus. Although he is a pagan king, he is saluted as the anointed of YHWH, his servant raised up to conquer Babylon and to restore God's people to their homeland:

For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.

This inaugurates a line of Jewish teaching about the state, including the pagan state, that culminates in Jesus' pronouncement about the payment of tribute money (today's gospel) and in Paul's teaching about the Roman state under the emperor Nero as the servant and minister of God.

Responsorial Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

Another selection from this psalm is used on the second Sunday of the year in series C. It is one of the enthronement psalms, which, according to some scholars, were sung at a (hypothetical) annual feast in which the king was enthroned in order to symbolize YHWH's kingship over his people. As the king took his seat upon his earthly throne, the whole people would have chanted this psalm in celebration of the kingship of YHWH.

This psalm (which, incidentally, tends to be overworked in Anglicanism because, I suspect, of the Book of Common Prayer's mistranslation of the first line of the third stanza as "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness") has close affinities in theological outlook with Second Isaiah. It emphasizes the sovereignty of YHWH over all nations and thus forms a fitting response to the proclamation of God's appointment of Cyrus.

Reading II: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b

This letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest written document in the New Testament. It was written by Paul during his stay at Corinth in 50 C.E.. Paul had founded the church at Thessalonica not very long before. He had had to leave it hurriedly, and, in his anxiety over his recent converts, he sent Timothy to see how things were going.

The report Timothy brought back was largely favorable—hence the warm tone of the opening thanksgiving that forms the main part of today's reading. But there were also a few problems in Thessalonica; we will meet them on the thirty-second and thirty-third Sundays.

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-21

Apart from a few stylistic changes, Matthew has taken over this pericope substantially in its Marcan form. He also retains the Marcan context, where it precedes the question of the Sadducees about the resurrection (Mk 12:18-27 / Mt 22:23-33), though Matthew has inserted the parable of the great banquet between the parable of the vineyard and the present pericope.

Also, Matthew has rewritten the introduction so as to speak of a plot to entrap Jesus. The result of these changes is to emphasize that the episode of the tribute money was part of Jesus' conflict with his opponents. It thus is part of the material with which Matthew seeks to speak directly to the situation of the church in his day, locked as it was in mortal combat with the Jewish leaders of Jamnia over the question of what was true orthodoxy and who were the true people of God.

The Pharisees' question about the tribute money is a classic example of the so-called pronouncement story, with its threefold form of setting, action, and pronouncement. Everything in this story is subordinated to the punchline: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This pronouncement has been interpreted in many different ways in the course of Christian history. Often, like Rm 13, it has been construed in the interests of a conservative throne-and-altar theology as in Lutheran orthodoxy that reached its tragic climax in the German Christian movement during the Nazi period. Exegesis in Germany has swung to the other extreme today: "Only a penny for Caesar, everything else for God."

A more reasonable interpretation would be that Caesar has his own legitimate but limited sphere, and even that he holds it under God and is responsible to God for its proper governance.

This does not necessarily mean—though in certain circumstances it has meant and could mean again—that the state itself has to profess Christianity. It means that the state must be what it is and perform the proper functions of a state in maintaining law and order and promoting the welfare of its citizens.

But when it oversteps the mark and puts itself in the place of God, Christians are in the last resort absolved from obedience. We must give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and not the things that are God's. We must obey God rather than human beings.

Reginald H. Fuller