# Our Sunday Readings

ISAIAH 45:1,4-6
PSALM 96:1,3-5,7-10
I THESSALONIANS 1:1-5b
MATTHEW 22:15-21

## Who's in Charge?

**ISAIAH 45:1,4-6**

***Reading closely***

1. What seems to be the LORD's relationship to Cyrus?
2. What will God enable Cyrus to do?
3. Why is the LORD supporting Cyrus?
4. Why do you think the LORD insists that he alone is God?
5. How well does Cyrus know the LORD?
6. How might Cyrus feel about all this?
7. How might Cyrus respond to all this?
8. How might the Israelites have responded to this prophecy?

***Living the word***

9. How readily do you notice God's action in your life?
10. How do you think God is at work in your life right now?

### THE FIRST READING

***The pagan messiah***

In the early sixth century BC the Israelites were conquered by the Babylonian Empire. About fifty years later the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians, and King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree that allowed the Israelites to rebuild their city and temple.

Isaiah calls Cyrus the LORD's *messiah*, the Hebrew word for *anointed* (v.1). The title *Christ* is from the Greek word for *anointed*.

Kings, priests, and court-appointed prophets were anointed as a sign that God had chosen them for these particular roles. The Israelites, however, would have been shocked to hear this title applied to a foreign ruler. Cyrus remains the only Gentile in the Bible who is hailed as God's anointed.

***By divine decree***

Although Cyrus doesn't know the God of the Israelites, the LORD chooses this pagan king to defeat the enemies of Israel (v.1). Isaiah insists that the LORD has inspired Cyrus to permit the Israelites to return to their homeland and rebuild their ruined city and temple.

Once they rebuild, Cyrus and all people, Jews and Gentiles, will know that the LORD alone is the true king and lord of heaven and earth (v.6).

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## MATTHEW 22:15-21

### *Reading closely*

1. How do the Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians feel about Jesus?
2. Why do you think they feel this way?
3. How do they act toward Jesus?
4. Who all might be watching this exchange?
5. How does Jesus respond to their behavior?
6. Do you think Jesus knows one of them will have a Roman coin?
7. How do you think people react when one of Jesus' adversaries produces the coin?
8. How would you describe Jesus' answer?
9. How do you imagine Jesus' tone of voice and gestures?
10. As Jesus' adversaries go away, what all might be going through their minds?
11. What might onlookers think of all this?
12. If you had been there, what would you have said or done?

### *Living the word*

13. What do you have that "belongs to Caesar?"
14. What do you have that "belongs to God?"
15. Are you giving to God what belongs to God?
16. In what specific, concrete ways can you oppose or reform groups and/or institutions that harm people?

## THE GOSPEL READING

### *Refuting Jesus*

Jesus has delivered three parables of judgment against religious leaders. Now they're looking for a way either to make him look bad or to get him arrested. The Herodians are probably members of the Jewish aristocracy who were loyal to Herod Antipas, king of Galilee, one of the sons of Herod the Great.

### *"Teacher"*

Jesus' opponents call him *teacher*, a bad sign. In Matthew's Gospel the only people who call Jesus *teacher* are those who either see him as merely one teacher among many or think he shouldn't be teaching at all. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is the true face of God's teaching and the only one whose teaching and example should rule our lives.

### *Paying taxes*

Paying taxes to the Roman Empire was controversial. Taxes were an economic burden and a reminder of foreign domination. Taxes also had to be paid in Roman currency, which was stamped with the image of the emperor. According to Jewish law God's people were not to make or use such images (see Exodus 20:4).

### *Setting traps*

If Jesus tells people to pay the tax, then he sounds insensitive to the hardships of his people and supportive of an oppressive foreign power. If he says people don't have to pay the tax, then his opponents could report him to the Romans as a rebel.

Jesus avoid this trap while setting one of his own: he gets his adversaries to show that they have one of the very coins they're asking Jesus if they should use.

### *The real issue*

Although Jesus answers in favor of paying taxes, he rises above the controversy. Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus challenges people to consider whether they're ultimately living as God intends. Here he suggests that people shouldn't be so preoccupied with particular issues that they neglect more important matters, like answering God's call to holiness and justice.

## PRAYER

*by Jacob Astley*

Lord God,
Help me today to realize that you will be speaking to me through the events of the day,
through people, through things,
and through creation.

Give me the ears, eyes, and heart to perceive you, however veiled your presence may be.
Give me insight to see through the exterior of things to the interior truth.
Give me your Spirit of discernment.

O Lord, you know how busy I must be this day.
If I forget you, do not forget me. Amen.