

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## LOVING POLITICS

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

October 17, 2020

ISAIAH 45:1-7 | PSALM 96

I THESSALONIANS 1:1-10 | MATTHEW 22:15-22

The ancient world had no nations states, no democracies or autocracies that dictated how wealth is to be created and divided up. By the time of Jesus, there had been four great political experiments, four empires, that had managed to demand allegiance of the various tribes and territories of the known world.

The oldest, and therefore most famous, was the great Assyrian empire headquartered in Babylon (modern day Iraq). It was a brutal colonizing power, expropriating taxes, forcing people to give up their religion, and ruling the Eastern Mediterranean world with an

iron fist. Tired of constant skirmishes with twelve insignificant tribes on their western border, they invaded Israel, captured Jerusalem, and burned their famous temple to the ground, deciding on a “final solution” of taking the ruling elite captive to Babylon.

A more enlightened people rose up in the East to defend themselves. The Persians conquered the Babylonians in the court of public opinion and at the ballot box. They preferred to offer the people they conquered true security and the rule of common law in return for the taxes and allegiance required. Most importantly, they wisely allowed newly integrated peoples to keep their religion. The Persian Empire reached its height under Cyrus the Great, who the prophet Isaiah mentions today.

Cyrus was famous for many things. Our passage this morning surprises us by claiming that, even though he did not know the Holy One of Israel, he was doing God’s bidding. Don’t be fooled by all the headlines, all the politics, God is in control of history. Cyrus released the Israelites to return home to rebuild the temple and start again.

The Persians would reign until Alexander the Great spread Greek art and culture throughout the world in a blaze of glory. As is well known, Alexander did not live long enough to consolidate his vast empire. But he showed how it could be done in the diverse and open geography of the Mediterranean. Tribes to the west and north of Greece took notice. Borrowing the Greek’s rich culture, religion, military and naval skill, they combined it with the common law of the Persians, the Romans ruled the known world for centuries with a combination of enlightenment and terror.

In 27 BCE, Octavian was proclaimed Caesar Augustus, the glorious one, the son of God. Twenty-five years later, just before Jesus of Nazareth was born, the Emperor Tiberius became Caesar, the human head and divine splendor of the Roman Empire. During that time, a friend of Julius Caesar, King Herod the Great, would ride into Jerusalem with pretensions to reestablish Jewish rule over Israel. He was well brave, brilliant and connected. The Romans let him rebuild the Temple and consolidate power. Still, as Jesus began his ministry, his many accomplishments were fading as his sons could not maintain control.

It is at this moment, when King Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, is trying to keep the money flowing in, the religious parties in line, and the Romans out of his business that Jesus of Nazareth brazenly challenges him by upstaging his annual entrance into Jerusalem for Passover with a donkey parade and throws out all the money changers in the Temple. The politics were complicated. Jesus was upsetting a delicate balance.

The Pharisees, who would never think of getting in bed with Herod's party, were desperate to do anything to get him out of the Temple. They are even willing to walk in the Temple precincts with an idolatrous image of Lord Caesar in their pocket. They practice their most cunning and flattering voices. They conspired to put Jesus to the test. Jesus calls their bluff in more ways than one. Mostly, as he asks them for the forbidden coin, he forces them to think about what they are doing.

Jesus famous answer, give the things that are Caesar's to Caesar, and the things that are God's to God, comes from a place beyond politics. It comes from that place that often only shows up for us in times of real crisis, when the social order is at stake, when empires are declining, maybe even falling.

As people of faith we can react in fear, in the distraction of conspiracy theories or brazen tribal loyalties. Or we can react as Isaiah, Jesus and Paul did by looking to how God might be in charge in the midst of all the chaos.

St. Augustine of Hippo lived at such a time. As northern Egypt was falling to the invading barbarian armies, he looked out over the walls and thought about the things that all of us have in common, the things necessary to reestablish a common good. He thought of way more than the contrast of the City of God with the City of Man. He thought of what made a city a city, a people a people. He realized that Cicero's definition of what made for social and political order was insufficient. He could see that even common interests and a cultural agreement on what is right, usually handed down by religion, is never enough. Something else is needed for a disparate group of families, tribes and territories to come together and make a people.

Here is St. Augustine's astonishing definition:

“A people, we may say, is a gathered multitude of rational being united by agreeing to share the things they love. There can be as many different kinds of people as there are different things for them to love. Whatever those things may be, there is no absurdity in calling it a people if it is a gathered multitude, not of beasts but of rational creatures, united by agreeing to share what they love. The better the things, the better the people; the worse the things, the worse their agreement to share them.”

We usually do not think of love when we think of politics. Or when we do, we make the mistake of making it personal. The question is not whether this or that politician loves or cares for us. The question is what this or that politician's vision of the common good is. That vision must also be based on practical information about what we care about, why we should care about it, and what it means for our neighbor.

It is just a fact that in the time of great crisis and sacrifice, from the 1930s to the 1980s, Americans were overwhelming proud to pay their taxes. Not so much anymore. We have forgotten, in our winner take all society, what we love, and therefore why we should rejoice to share it with others. Politics is about power to be sure, but what a Christian needs to see and vote for is the society, the policies and those virtuous leaders who have a plan for sharing the highest values we can hold among the greatest number of us.

I wonder if Jesus had this in mind when he left the Pharisees and the Herodians with his little riddle. We certainly know we owe God everything. But what in heavens name do I owe these conceited insincere fools in front of me. Jesus looked at them with those eyes of love. And he hoped they would walk away and think of those highest rights, privileges and responsibilities they needed to share to make a more just, equitable and less corrupt society.

In the days ahead, let's read the headlines and think about what we love and how we can give it away!