

We have the beginning of a Letter as our second reading today,

- and letters usually come with best wishes—
- some good news.
- The format of a letter back in New Testament days
- was like email: the first thing it does is announce who it is from and to.
- Today's Letter is from:
 - "Paul, Sylvanus, and Timothy,"
 - then it tells us it is "to the church of the Thessalonians,"
- often with a bit added as
- **"in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**
- This is quickly followed with the end of the introduction,
- Something like, "Grace to you and peace."

If this sermon were a letter to you I might begin:

"Rick, a priest in the Church of God,

- rejoicing to be with the Church of the Atonement,
- who by God's power have been drawn in by grace
 - and with God's power reach out in love.
- Peace and all good to you this day."

Now I want us to feel the shock of the opening of the Old Testament lesson

- about a prophet helping the people interpret God's prophecy,
- and then I'll speak about a parable told by Jesus.

We know Isaiah is a prophet,

- but even if we didn't know who Isaiah was,
- we would know we're reading prophecy from the first words of the lesson:
- "Thus says the Lord."
- Like Letters in 1st century Palestine, those opening words of prophecy often are followed by some good words.

{In just the two chapters before we have the phrase "Thus says the Lord...", repeated 4 times:

- 43: 1—"Thus says the LORD,...: Fear not, for...I have called you by name, you are mine."
- 43:14—"Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:"
- 44:6—"Thus says he Lord, the King of Israel..., the LORD of hosts 'I am the first and the last, besides me there is no god.'"
- 44:24—"Thus says the LORD...
 - who formed you from the womb...,
 - who stretched out the heavens alone,

- who spread out the earth
- ⊖ [and] who was with me?"

The chapter just before today's, (44)

- ends by saying Cyrus, the foreign king of the Persians,
- shall "fulfil [the LORD's purpose,"—not particularly out of the ordinary,
- for God had fulfilled God's purposes through foreigners many times before,
- not least of which was when the Egyptians were used in the story of the Exodus.

To give you a sense of how offensive God is in our OT Lesson,

- I respond how I think they would respond to the LORD:
- What a shock!
- Again I say a shock!
- To hear, "The LORD"... "**OUR** God."
- speak the name of Cyrus without contempt would be shock enough, (How dare God speak so positively to him.)
- rather than to God's people..
- What is far worse, is to call Cyrus God's, "anointed," a monicker usually reserved for the Messiah,
 - which is Hebrew for anointed one.
 - At the very least it should refer to one of OUR anointed kings,
 - or OUR priests,
 - or OUR prophets.
- Cyrus is **not** one of us.
- He may be setting God's people free from the exile,
- Yet, Isaiah, the prophet, should have known who Cyrus is,
 - a Persian King. Persian!—
 - We've been at war with them (even in the 21st century).
- How tempting to never trust the prophet again.
- Imagine the revulsion we feel when we think the LORD "grasped" Cyrus's "right hand."
- It is all fine and good if all that grasping is for the subduing of **other** nations,
- stripping **others'** leaders of their self respect,
- humiliating **them** before the nations.
- But the LORD is subduing **us**,
- Stripping **our** leaders of their self respect,
- humiliating **us** before the nations.

What really bothers me in all of this:

- the LORD will squander our treasures "hidden in darkness," and stored in "secret places."

Why will the LORD bankrupt us as a nation?

- Why humiliate us?
- In our OT Lesson it is “So that [Cyrus] may know that it is the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls [Cyrus] by...name?”
- We used to hear our name called from God’s lips, but now God refers to Cyrus.
- The LORD calls Cyrus by name in spite of the fact that Cyrus does not know the LORD,
- How dare the LORD “give [Cyrus] power.
- Assuring Cyrus, “I arm you, though you do not know me,”
- How dare the LORD arm and empower a foreign enemy to act on (God’s) behalf.
- Our problem we want to say we are right to dispute with God.

Yet God says after our reading:

- “Woe to them who strive with their Maker,
- an earthen vessel with the potter!
- Does the clay say to the potter who fashions it, “What are you making?”

In playing the role of the shocked people of Israel I have been striving with God,

- and to be honest, this striving translates today to the realm of politics.
- The LORD does good things for those who disagree with me.
- I think God should not empower them, but God does.

From my perspective God allows leaders that undermine

- our place in history—
- our place in the natural order,
- and our diplomatic standing with other nations.
 - (Our freedom will long be seen as limited and inhospitable.)
- These things will take generations to repair,
- if ever we are given the chance to repair them.

I know my thoughts don’t limit God’s reach to my opinion.

- Isn’t it the same issue raised by those testing Jesus?
- “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?”
- “Show me the coin.”
- In terms of Jewish law, Jesus had trapped them right there,
- for when they brought a coin they held an idol with the emperor, a god, on it.
- Religious purists would like the issue to end there,
- Wouldn’t it be really great if we could forget to pay to the emperor what is the emperor’s?
 - We might think we would save a ton of money and stay pristine, unsullied by filthy lucre!
- Not in our world.

- Our world doesn't accommodate purity so easily.
- For God is willing to get God's hands' dirty.
- Even the dirt belongs to God.
- If Cyrus the enemy can be God's instrument,
- The defiled coin can be available to God to use as God sees fit, and God can work beyond my vote.
- God's purity is such that God stays pure without being polluted by...–well, by pollution.
- There are forces that push against each and every opinion I have, regarding
 - elections.
 - foreign allies,
 - immigrants in their homelands,
 - and the hospitality we show.
 - I could speak of many other matters, but there are forces standing against each and every one of these.
 - If we're not careful, we try to limit God's reach to extend only ours.
 - And God doesn't want to accept such limits. It's a matter of complete incarnation, the sacramental nature of the world runs deep, very deep indeed. Thank God.

Adapted from Hymn 100, Joy to the world,

- May the saving embrace of God's love, truth, and grace
- reach far as the curse is found,
- and make all nations prove
- wonders of God's love.

AMEN.