

**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Sunday closest to October 12**



Proper 23

Year A

RCL

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Psalm 96:1-9

Matthew 22:15-22

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

AMEN

Psalm 96:1-9, (10-13)

Cantate Domino

- 1 Sing to the LORD a new song; *
sing to the LORD, all the whole earth.
- 2 Sing to the LORD and bless his Name; *
proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to
day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations *
and his wonders among all peoples.
- 4 For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; *
he is more to be feared than all gods.
- 5 As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; *
but it is the LORD who made the heavens.
- 6 Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! *
Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!
- 7 Ascribe to the LORD, you families of the peoples; *
ascribe to the LORD honor and power.
- 8 Ascribe to the LORD the honor due his Name; *
bring offerings and come into his courts.
- 9 Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness; *
let the whole earth tremble before him.

- 10 [Tell it out among the nations: "The LORD is King! *
he has made the world so firm that it cannot be
moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
- 11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it; *
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
- 12 Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy
before the LORD when he comes, *
when he comes to judge the earth.
- 13 He will judge the world with righteousness *
and the peoples with his truth.]

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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 labor 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; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you

became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Matthew 22:15-22

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, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and

they left him and went away.

SERMON

Kathy and I saw the new production of the Magic Flute from the Met last week. This production made extensive use of puppetry by the same group who did the puppets for “The Lion King” on Broadway, so these weren’t little hand puppets. They were huge! I started thinking about puppets, something I haven’t done since Howdy Doody left the air.

The soul of puppetry is to convince the audience of the reality of that which is not real, and the unimportance of that which is real. Puppets substitute unreal representations of reality for actual reality, subject to the audience’s willingness to suspend reality. One scene featured some eight-foot tall bears, really nothing more than stylized bears sketched on white silk stretched on a wire frame and attached to the hands and feet of the puppeteers/dancers who were dressed in black. The ef-

fect was that the puppeteers – the reality – disappeared into the background, while the unreality – mere paintings of bears – took on the illusion of reality. To focus your attention on the puppets, you must deliberately reject reality for an unreality which might be more agreeable to you personally, but which is, nonetheless, still an unreality.

The thought came to me that the image of a puppet – an unreality which is offered in lieu of our authentic selves – describes an awful lot of the stuff we get up to. Sometimes, we’re so successful that we fool even ourselves. That’s not a good thing. God demands our authentic selves, not some creature of silk and paint.

Our passage today occurs after Jesus’s Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the event we abstract into Palm Sunday with children waving palms and shouting “Hosanna”. As in all good puppet shows, there was

more than that going on. The reality was that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a deadly serious thing, not a children's play at all. Jerusalem was occupied by Rome. Peace with Rome was contingent upon agreements between Rome and various Jewish groups, Herodians and Pharisees among them. Jesus entering town as a conquering hero was the LAST thing anybody wanted. They knew on which side of the bread the butter was to be found, and it was on the Roman side. To them, Jesus was clearly a threat to the very existence of the Temple, but to the crowds, Jesus was a prophet. The Pharisees couldn't confront Him directly without incurring the wrath of the crowds, so they resorted to a subterfuge, a puppet if you will.

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians

Our usual course when dealing with the Pharisees is to define them as the bad guys with bad motives up to bad stuff for no discernible reason apart from a commitment to badness. That is to focus on two-dimensional puppets, this time puppets which we impose on them. The Pharisees were the Orthodox Jews of the time – those with the most comprehensive commitment to God’s Law. The reality is that calling the Pharisees either hero or villain is simultaneously both right and wrong. They were committed to scrupulous attention to the Mitzvot, but they also had a dog in the hunt in maintaining good relations with Rome, for by doing so, they could best protect the Temple.

They thought, I am convinced, that they were acting to save themselves and the people of Jerusalem from Roman punishment because of the uprising Jesus represented. If Jesus taught his radical ideas in the very

courtyard of the Temple and the Romans got wind of it, what do you think they would do? From the perspective of Matthew's first readers, who lived in a time after Rome showed just what they could do if provoked, the answer was clear. Far from being the bad guys with bad motives up to bad stuff for no discernible reason apart from a commitment to badness, the Pharisees may well have believed they were acting in defense of their city by preventing Jesus and His followers from provoking Rome. This they did, dishonestly. They lied to Jesus.

“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?”

The idea here, after buttering Jesus up with that bit of flattery, was to get Him to say something that would incriminate him in the eyes of Rome. But look at what

they are trying to accomplish, and the way they propose to do it. The puppet is trying to eliminate Jesus as a threat to the status quo, arguably a righteous thing to do from their perspective, by dishonest means. You simply cannot accomplish good by undertaking evil. These conflicted goals and tactics make what happened next all the more riveting.

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.

SNAP! The trap snaps shut on those seeking to trap Jesus. They are in the Temple. The denarius, the coin in which the census tax must be paid, bore the image of the Emperor and the inscription, “*Tiberius Caesar divi Augusti Filius Augustus Pontifex Maximus*” or “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus,

high priest.” Those questioning Jesus were not to carry into the Temple any images, and certainly no image proclaiming that Tiberius is august or that Augustus was high priest. Had the puppeteers been as righteous as they presented themselves to be, no such coin would have been in their possession. Jesus called them hypocrites and they convicted themselves by their own actions. With Jesus’ question, the puppets disappear and we are left with the naked puppeteers, their hypocrisy visible to all.

Now we see how we have in the past dishonored this pericope by trying to turn it into tax advice. Those questioning Jesus weren’t bad guys doing bad things in the name of badness. Like all of us, they were trying to be the heroes of their own story by saving their city and the entire system of Temple worship from this heretical preacher from Nazareth. It won’t work. Trying to secure

good outcomes by bad means never works. We see that over and over through history, yet we never seem to learn the lesson.

We live in a terrifying world, a world divided to the bone politically. The explanation we reach for to explain why we are so divided seems always to be that the other side represents the bad guys doing bad things for the sake of badness, whereas we proudly fly the flag of righteousness. Are we not taught that

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?¹

If we could but view all our brothers and sisters as Paul told the Thessalonian church:

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 labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our

¹ James 4:12, New American Standard Bible

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; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

Would not our world rest easier, freed of the need for puppetry?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Our friends in Ohio are having quite a tizzy over something called Issue 2. Pro and con ads, clearly costing a ton of money, are all over the TV. Federal law says that you have to identify yourself to run these ads, and, indeed, they do. “Citizens for Cheap Drugs” or “Ohioans Against Issue 2”. Those are the puppets. There is no telling who is really behind the ads. We’ve become immunized against that sort of chicanery, which is why we have learned to mistrust almost everything. Sometimes, I think we even mistrust Scripture. God never works through puppets.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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