

Pentecost 20A

October 22, 2017

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Isaiah 45:1-7

God even used Cyrus, king of Persia, to work God's plan.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

We know that God has chosen you.

Matthew 22:15-22

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar; give to God what belongs to God

Irony in Isaiah passage. God anointed Cyrus, empowered him to defeat his enemies, calls him by name. Cyrus was the king of Persia. He defeated the Babylonian empire, and allowed the exiled Israelites to return to their homeland. God was the source of the power that enabled Cyrus to defeat Babylon. Our God is the god of all creation; not just of Israel; speaking today, not just the god of the people who worship Him. Cyrus didn't know God, but God called him by name, and used him to accomplish God's purpose.

It was on the apostle Paul's second missionary journey, travelling counter-clockwise around the Mediterranean Sea that he stopped in Thessalonica. It was a huge city, a sea-port, with a population of about 200,000. This city was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. The Egnatian Way passed through the city, a lot like Route 101 for us: It was the main trading route that extended from Rome all the way to the Orient. So the city was filled with people of many cultures and religions; there were temples worshipping many gods. It was in this potpourri that Paul chose to establish a Christian Church. The year was AD 50, only 17 years after Jesus' ascension. Two years later, in AD 52, Paul wrote to the people in Thessalonica from Corinth to encourage them and to answer a few questions they had. This letter is the oldest document contained in the New Testament. It predates the writing of the Gospels.

Paul wrote that knowing the Good News that God sent Jesus Christ to save us, changes us. And by Paul seeing the change in the people of Thessalonica. Listen to this paraphrase of part of our reading today, taken from The Message:

"It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions. ... The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore— you're the message!"

God had called them by name, and God was using them to accomplish God's purpose.

The Pharisees and the people loyal to king Herod tried to trap Jesus to discredit him, by asking whether they should pay taxes to the emperor. This was a big dispute among the religious leaders. These taxes went to their Roman oppressors; and this income was used to support pagan temples and Roman rule over them. Either way that Jesus would answer them, they would have won. If he said ‘yes, pay the tax’, the Pharisees could discredit him for supporting Roman paganism. If he said ‘no, don’t pay the tax’, the Herodians could have him arrested for sedition against Roman authority.

But Jesus bypassed all that, and turned it into a teaching about honoring God as our creator. He pointed out that the image on the coins used to pay the taxes were of the emperor. Okay, then. Money is just money. The image on the coin identifies the owner to be the emperor; pay to the emperor what is already his. But the Bible tells us (Genesis 1:26), “God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.” You and I have been made in God’s image. We belong to God. He calls us by name, and He gives us each our purpose in life. Jesus was teaching that our heart, mind, and soul belong to God, and we should be giving of ourselves back to God.

“The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore— you’re the message!” You and I are the message to the preschool families, to the Children’s Home, to the city of Hollister, to everyone we meet when we find a way to share the faith that motivates everything we do.

How will our children have faith if we do not show them our own faith?

How will our culture return to a culture of faith if we do not make our own faith known?

How do we model for our children, our next door neighbors’ children, or the people we work with, or our government officials, what it means to live life built on a foundation of faith, if we do not make our faith known?

How do you send The Message that your faith foundation is deeply, strategically, spiritually, eternally important to you?

We start by giving back to God what is God’s. Amen.