

Readings Isaiah 45.1-7;
 Matthew 22.15-22

Sermon

At the end of a performance, when the credits roll on a film, after everyone has made their final bows, and someone may have said words to the effect of: 'the show has ended please leave through the nearest exit.' It is clear what we should do. When we see the flashing lights of a police car, ambulance, or fire engine, we move to the side to let them by. And if the police car is just staying behind us, and we know why they are, we pull over and look for our license.

Road signs tell us about left turns, give ways, one way streets. Walking around town we see signs for toilets, the post office, churches. We learn what all these things mean, what is expected of us, and what they are for.

Signs that we put up on our streets or noticeboards are straightforward, with little room for a variety of interpretations, just there to make life easier for everyone; and we can use them or ignore them as we need to.

But how do we see signs for God? Wouldn't it be nice if all we had to do was follow a set of instructions and we could see, and we could easily convince others of, God. God is beyond our words, incapable of being constrained by a simple sign, and even the most coherent argument for God's existence can have no effect if a person is unwilling to listen.

Faith is the foundation upon which our beliefs are built. Faith in God opens the way for us to talk about God, to discuss and discern the nature of God. We all come with our own experiences of life, and our own interpretations of how God has been involved in our lives. God has been revealed to us as we have opened ourselves to God's presence in prayer, through reading scripture, in worship, and in sharing in the fellowship of the church, sharing our lives with other followers of the way of Christ.

As church we can share our beliefs, test our assertions, discern the will of God. We can put forward ideas, discuss them, pray about them, and then step out in faith by taking action, holding a position, or attempting to foster an attitude. This is how we live out our faith, how we form and challenge our beliefs, how we live as disciples of Christ, as church.

This is how the faith, which forms the foundation of our life as Christians, is built upon, but we are only able to build upon that foundation, create opportunities for it to be established, as church we are not able to dig foundations. The foundation of the Christian life, the faith upon which our lives are built, is the work of God. There is no magic pill, no set of instructions, to give someone faith. Faith comes as an action of God's Spirit, faith comes when someone draws close to God and seeks an explanation for that sensation. When their eyes are opened to the reality of God, their lives become open to the possibility of God's call upon them, and they seek people of faith to search for answers to these questions.

By living out our faith, by being church, a place of welcome, honesty, openness, challenge, a community that shares their lives, is open to God in worship and

service, we can be a beacon to people as they search for answers. We can assist God's Spirit to engage in the lives of others, to help create opportunities for faith, for the foundation to be laid.

It is by being true to our faith that others will see Christ, it is by living seeing Christ in others that we will truly be church, and be a beacon of God's kingdom in this place.

Faith is the foundation upon which our lives are built. Together we explore how we live out our faith, the complexities of what we believe, and discern the will of God.

This model of being church can also be seen in how the people of Israel in the Old Testament lived as God's chosen people. Prophets would rise up from the people, challenge them with their words, and these would be tested to decide whether they were the word of God. The words that were found to be of God were kept, written down, and preserved across the centuries to find their place in scripture, in the Old Testament.

In this way the words of Isaiah come to us. Isaiah speaks for God to Cyrus, but Cyrus does not know God. Isaiah is speaking to the people of Israel about Cyrus. Cyrus was the ruler of the Persian empire. In the 6th C BC Cyrus conquered the Babylonian empire and Persia became the dominant power in the region. The Babylonian empire's policy had been to resettle conquered peoples in a different part of their empire, removing the ruling class and replacing them with loyal subjects. Cyrus had a different policy, he let people return to their native lands, follow their own beliefs and customs, as long as they remained loyal and paid their taxes. If they didn't, then Cyrus became a very different ruler and enforced his will with violence and death.

Isaiah in chapter 44 sees God working through Cyrus, and foresaw the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple through this new world power which would free Jews from exile (Is. 44:28). Cyrus is called God's anointed, Cyrus would be God's 'Messiah'-deliverer and an instrument of the divine plan.

To those who first heard Cyrus described in this way it must have seemed as astonishing a claim as that which described Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as 'the servant of YHWH' in Jeremiah 27:6. Yet all the military victories which tradition credited to Cyrus were simply 'for the sake of my servant Jacob'. The tradition embodied here recognizes that Cyrus knew nothing of YHWH; he was an unwitting instrument of the divine purpose, which, in a way left unspecified, would be recognized in Cyrus's achievements.

Hearing Isaiah's words after three thousand years dulls the effect they would have had on their first hearers. Isaiah is saying that the mighty empire that is quickly approaching them, defeating nation after nation, conquering their allies and enemies alike, is doing God's will.

In the midst of this fear, Isaiah is telling them that being defeated will be good for them.

How would that message have gone down in our country in 1940?

History would have proved this message disastrously wrong in the face of Nazism,

but it proved Isaiah right. If Israel had not accepted Persian rule they would have been removed from history, their culture and faith would have been no more. Looking back after three thousand years the declaring of an action by a military empire as God's will is felt to be true, it has been proven out by history.

But how do we feel when we hear similar language spoken of current events?

On BBC2 last Monday and for the next two at 9pm is a programme called: Israel and the Arabs: Elusive Peace. On it a Palestinian negotiator, Mr Shaath, said that in a 2003 meeting with Mr Bush, the US president said he was "driven with a mission from God". "God would tell me, George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan. And I did, and then God would tell me, George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq... And I did. And now, again, I feel God's words coming to me, Go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security, and get peace in the Middle East. And by God I'm gonna do it."

This has been declared as absurd by the White House, but it does sound as if there is an element of truth to it. It feels as if it is something he would think, even if he didn't say those exact words. When matters of life and death are discussed using the name of God, it makes me nervous. Throughout time people have used God's word to them to justify some of the most tragic events of history.

We explored this during our Revelation Bible study, looking at how Revelation has been used by people, and how often the book has been used to justify their own ideas rather than to challenge them. Revelation was written at a time of persecution of the church, written using apocalyptic language, death and destruction and the end of the world, full of images and metaphors, and allusions to Old Testament writings.

There are 404 verses in the book and more than 500 allusions to the Old Testament that would have conjured up images and stories in the minds of the first hearers. The book of Revelation seeks to reveal Jesus Christ to those who read it, that is its primary aim and how we should read the images of the end of the world.

Just as our lives should all be revelations of Jesus Christ, our lives should reveal something of the nature of Christ to others. So what nature does our gospel reading point to? The Jewish leaders want to trick Jesus into giving an answer that will either make him lose the support of his fellow Jews, or will get him arrested by the Romans. The question is whether they should pay their taxes to the Roman emperor. If he says yes, the people will denounce him as a collaborator and stop following him. If he says no, the Romans will arrest him as a threat to their authority.

So Jesus asked to see a coin and they brought him a denarius, a Roman coin. 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.

In this reading there is a balance between church and state. There is the duty to pay our taxes and do what society asks of us, be good citizens, unless they conflict with

what God asks of us. God has the first call upon our lives, it is our faith that forms the foundation of how we live, we live as subjects of this nation and as citizens of God's kingdom. As church we gather together to live out our faith, worship God, and talk of the things of this world with an eye to eternity, in the light of the reality of God.

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So in all things:

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Amen