

“On Being a Good Citizen”
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 24
22 October 2023
Trinity+St. Peter’s Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96:1-13
I Thessalonians 1:1-10
Saint Matthew 22:15-23

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Example 1: Even those unrelated to your faith can be agents of God’s good grace.

Isaiah gives us a startling example of who is the Messiah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah were both besieged by the Mesopotamian powers. Israel was demolished and depopulated by the Assyrian Empire in the Eighth Century, Peoples were taken out of their lands and sent to other territories, as a way of parting them from their culture and their religion. There lands were repopulated by peoples conquered from other areas, and settled in the former lands of Israel.

Judah was besieged by the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar. Under his rule, however, it was only the upper classes that were taken off to Babylon, while the peasants and other lower classes remained in a ruined country, bereft of Temple or a Davidid king.

Into this scene comes, according to the Second of the Isaiahs, a Messiah – an anointed One. He was not of the lineage of David, nor was he even Jewish. He was a Mede, and he established the Persian Empire. What makes him a hero to Isaiah is that he arranged for the people that had been sent to other lands, the right to return, the right to rebuild the temple, and the right to resume the worship of YHWH. Thus, this Isaiah terms Cyrus as a messiah, an anointed one who accomplishes God’s will.

Those writing under the name of Isaiah saw the deeds done by the Assyrians and the Babylonians as being God’s will, God’s punishment upon Israel and Judah, for they had forgotten God’s ways. And with the tables turned, this Isaiah sees a foreign king as God’s agent. It teaches us that the mixture of government and religion can be a tricky thing, the outcome of which may not always be known to us. So the first lesson for us as citizens is to honor God, each in our own way, and not to demand our ways of others.

Example 2: Being faithful during difficult times

This first letter to the Thessalonians begins in a standard manner with a thanksgiving. This one is unusual, however, in its length, and in the fact that there are three thanksgivings in the letter. One commentator notes that the content of the

thanksgivings really forms the bulk of what St. Paul wants to communicate to his audience. The first of these thanksgivings is for the faith of the people. He notes that they are models of faith, specifically to fellow believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. This is not the first time that the behavior of the faithful has spoken the Gospel by example. In Acts we hear that the Christians were known for the love that they had for one another. So in this thanksgiving we learn that to be a good citizen is to be of good behavior in loving one another.

Paul goes on by reciting a history of these people in their faith, their conversion and by how they came to know Christ. In addition Paul recites his work with them, their persecution, and the urgency of the time. The key here may be the references to the congregation's persecution, "*for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy.*" Paul anticipates that this situation is going to continue into the future, and thus the purpose of this letter is to encourage this young congregation in their faith and steadfastness. Our understanding of what it means to be a Christian is being challenged by those who claim to be Christian as well, but with a totally different understanding. Loving one another seems to be the key. By having our social policies grounded in loving one another might make for a better society, one that recognizes the worth of everyone, and that strives to aid them in any circumstance.

Example 3: Recognizing God and Caesar

Jesus wrestles with good citizenship in an Israel occupied by Roman authority. The Pharisees attempt to use it as a wedge that separates Jesus from the obligations of his faith. The wedge is taxes. How perfect. We live in a time where there are those who are attempting to dissolve our democracy and to disable the government. Jesus counters this tactic and the tactic of the Pharisees by recognizing both God and Caesar. Such recognition doesn't happen at the expense of one over the other. Both are seen as necessary and helpful.

I'm reading a new book, [The Why of the Bible](#). In it the author (going back to Isaiah for a moment) sees the prophetic task of bring a people back to their land and to their God. They are not brought back, however, to their king. He asserts that Isaiah wants them to learn to be a people, a people led by God. Economics, culture, politics, and religious institutions are of another world. The prophet wants to reconnect the people to the God who seeks to lead them, to help them in their love of self, God, and one another.

So it is with Jesus. He is countlessly pointing out how religion has lost its way, and how God speaks to the now of people's lives. Thus we see numerous examples of people whom society considered as "sinners", people who didn't meet the social norms. Jesus sees them as lost sheep, a people to be sought and helped. Thus our final lesson on being a good citizen is encapsulated in the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Governments and Rulers may not support you in that task, but it is the task that God has given us.