

“Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and to God that which is God’s.” That’s the King James version many of you that are may age know best. Two sides of the same coin – the worlds and God’s. Much as are the crucifixion and the resurrection – one very much of the world, and the other that of God.

I preach a lot about living in this world while at the same time trying to faithfully live into God’s kingdom – which is the perfection of God’s creation in which we were always meant to live before human sin came into the world and separated us from God. And it is not just the metaphoric sin of Adam and Eve, it is our own, very real, sin.

The Pharisees were ordained by God yet they were more than content to live, and benefit from life, in the world, with all the power and prestige it bestowed upon them. They were tempted away from life with God at the center, by the world which let them believe they were at the center. And threatened by Jesus, who at every turn showed them how wrong they were, they endeavored to entrap and condemn him. Yet God prevailed.

Both our Old Testament reading from Isaiah and our psalm lift up Cyrus, the Persian ruler whom God used to free the Israelites from Babylonian exile. Both point to our covenantal relationship with God that cannot be shaken by the world, and promise destruction of any and all powers and principalities that oppose God. In both, the nature of God is revealed through God’s mighty acts, the salvation of the world that will not come from false idols but only the true and living God.

We will be reading through the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians in the coming weeks. This letter was written early in Paul’s ministry, within decades of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In it he endeavors to encourage a young, persecuted church to stand firm in their faith, live holy lives, and find hope in the promised return of Jesus Christ. He commends them for turning from false idols, often the gods of the world, and instead choosing to worship and serve the only living and true God. Following the teachings of Jesus, loving God and loving their neighbor as God loves them, as an example for the world around them.

The Pharisees, joined with the Herodians, the rulers of the day, conspire to trap Jesus into condemning himself so that they can be rid of the threat he poses to their lives and the status quo. He deftly outwits them by his oft repeated turn of phrase, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is Gods, as if they can be easily separated one from another. But like Jesus’ death and resurrection, two side of the cross cannot be separated, neither can two sides of the same coin.

It’s powerful, life-changing even, to consider that, as Christians, as followers of Jesus, our world and God’s kingdom, and the way we are meant to live in both, can be inextricably linked. But this, of course, depends on the choices we make, to live as God intends us to live, the ultimate expression of life in God’s kingdom, in our very own here and now. The Israelites didn’t do it perfectly, but they tried, and I believe that is what God saw.

God alone is perfection, we are not, but we can try to align ourselves, as Paul encourages the Thessalonians to do, with that which is the epitome of the kingdom of God: peace, justice, love, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. When each choice we make is rooted in these, well we are

getting closer to living in God's kingdom even now as we wait for its completion with the promised return of Christ. (That's an Advent theme we'll explore soon.)

But, what do we do when we inevitably slip up. When we fail to love our neighbor, when we fail to act for justice, peace, and love, or when we act unkindly, unfairly, spitefully, or hatefully?

Our liturgy offers a way forward through the confession of sin. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters know well the sacrament of confession. They have made it a holy habit to list their own faults, those things done and left undone, before their parish priest, and then through penitence atone for them. We have that option, to confess specifically and in private – but on any regular Sunday we instead make a corporate confession right before the peace. Like the peace, which we talked about a few weeks back, it, too, must mean something.

We have not loved you with our whole hearts. We have not loved our neighbors as we are loved by God. We have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We are truly sorry and we heartily repent.

Are we? Do we? Because regretting our actions and repenting of them are also two sides of the same coin.

I've been told I don't leave enough time between the bidding of the confession and the actual praying of it. I know that if I don't spend time in the days and hours before coming to worship thinking about these things my own confession lacks substance, becomes rather rote. I'll leave the time and space we all need going forward.

We live in a broken world, and we often participate in its brokenness, by things we have done, and by things we have left undone. By the mercy and grace of God we know God's forgiveness, God's compassion, and God's love anyway – because that is how God has chosen to be in relationship with us. It is how we are meant to chose to be in relationship with one another.

When the Israelites chose the ways of God they found their salvation. So did the Thessalonians. When the Pharisees opposed God and condemned Jesus they were lost. Each could have chosen differently – God's gift of free-will makes each choice their own.

We must choose, too. Thankfully, God offers us a way to live into God's kingdom now – even as we live in the world now. It is by following Jesus. As best we can. Every day.