

Lesson 11

Proper 24

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:15–22

Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus focused more and more on the confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities that would finally lead to His death. Jesus was no longer avoiding it, for His hour was at hand. If anything, with His parables and their application, He was pushing His opponents toward taking action against Him. Matthew says, "Although they were seeking to arrest Him, they feared the crowds, because they held Him to be a prophet" (21:46). In today's Holy Gospel, we see the Pharisees approaching Jesus with a plan by which they felt they could trap Him. Luke called these men "spies, who pretended to be sincere" (20:20). The disciples of the Pharisees brought with them some Herodians, members of a political group that contended for rule of Judea by one of Herod's line instead of direct rule by a Roman governor. Normally the Pharisees opposed the Herodians because the Herodians approved payment of taxes to the Romans, but at this time they wanted witnesses who had some political influence.

166. Why did the Pharisees think they "had" Jesus with their question, no matter which answer He might give?

167. Why did the Pharisees approach Him in such an effusive, complimentary fashion?

Jesus' response, by which He avoided their trap, was simple and direct. Once again, He made them supply the answer to their question themselves by asking them a related question. Then He precluded any further argument with His "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Luther and others pointed out that as Christians, we live in two kingdoms, and we have responsibility to God in both kingdoms.

168. In what sense are these two kingdoms exclusive of each other? How are they also inclusive for us as Christians?

169. How are we today called on to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”? (See Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17.) Explore some biblical ramifications of what it means for us to give “to God the things that are God’s” by reading Psalm 29:1–2; John 6:28–29; Matthew 10:32–33; Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 9:6–11; and Matthew 25:34–40.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 45:1–7

This lesson has the Lord speaking to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, as His “anointed.” The Hebrew word refers to one set apart for a special task, in token of which perfumed olive oil was poured on his head—as David was anointed as a lad to be the future king of Israel. The preceding verse (44:28) refers to Cyrus as the Lord’s “shepherd” who will accomplish what the Lord pleases. It has Cyrus “saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’ ” Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC and did indeed allow a remnant of the Jews to return to Judea under Zerubbabel, a prince of the Davidic line, to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

170. According to this pericope, what was behind the rise of Cyrus from king of a small nation to conqueror and ruler of all the Middle East?

There is no historical indication that Cyrus ever acknowledged Yahweh as his God. The Cyrus Cylinder, on which was found a record of his triumphs and glories, credits his god, Marduk, with all of this.

171. In what way did Cyrus acknowledge Yahweh?

Yahweh is pictured as the dominant factor in all of history—the one and only God who “form[s] light and create[s] darkness” and who “make[s] well-being and create[s] calamity.”

172. What is God’s ultimate purpose in guiding the destinies of men and nations?

173. How may we incorporate into our lives a greater sense of God’s providential guidance, even through circumstances of which we are not aware? (See James 4:13–17.)

174. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?