

Sermon Archive 171

Sunday 22 October 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 45: 1-7

Matthew 22: 15-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



My name is Cyrus, and I'm not particularly interested in God. Now hang on just a "sec", with your judgment. Not being interested in God doesn't mean that I'm incapable of goodness. You religious people often make those sorts of false leaps of logic. As it happens, your historians will consider me to have been the author of one of the earliest ever declarations of human rights. A little baked-clay cylinder with my words of toleration on it will be revered in your British museum. And an American replica will be part of a "human rights" display in your United Nations. That's not a bad legacy at all! So don't call me "bad" for being not much interested in God.

I guess you could describe me as a military man. Yes, I was born into a royal household, but it's my military advances that history will focus on. I took a middle-sized kingdom, and through some very clever military manoeuvring, turned it into a massive empire. After my campaign into Asia, someone described me as "King of the Four Corners of the World". Another described me as having "brought into subjection every nation without exception". (Truth to tell, I never conquered Egypt - but Egypt's just a bunch of sand and triangles. Never really appealed.) And also, to be honest, never much liked being described as a "subjugator". I like to think that I left room in my empire for wee bits of freedom.

In fact, one of the things you discover quite early, when your empire gets as big as mine got, is that "big" requires quite a light approach. On a large landscape, you can't be everywhere. You can't control every aspect of everyone's life. And realistically, even if you wanted to, you can't impose your own version of Persia on non-Persian people. Cultures are going to carry on. Religious beliefs and rituals are going to carry on. Your military

might be thick enough on the far-flung ground to keep order, and gather a few taxes - but nowhere near thick enough to swamp existing cultural norms. So you've got to let Asia be Asian. Got to let Babylon be Babylonian. You've got to let the Hebrews be Hebrew. If it's not human rights, it's just empire pragmatism. Insist on the big things (civil order, tax, political cooperation). But don't sweat the small stuff. And as I said at the start, among the small stuff is all that God bothering. I don't much bother about God.

God says to Cyrus "Though you do not know me, I call you by name . . ." God says to Cyrus "Though you do not know me, I arm you". God says to Cyrus "Though you do not know me, I'm taking you by your right hand." Not sure what to do with what God says, since as Cyrus says, "I'm not all that interested in God". Back to Cyrus.

My name is Cyrus. History's a bit divided on how I conquered Babylon. Some present it as a fierce battle - the wielding of many sharp and cutting swords. Other accounts have me arriving with such huge numbers of soldiers that the Babylonians just read the writing on the wall and surrendered. Other accounts have the Babylonians so much hating their own king, that they raced out to welcome me. So no one can tell you whether my right hand held a sword, or whether it pointed at an overwhelming army, or whether it just wrote an edict of take-over. The jury's out. But what's not under debate is that when I took charge of Babylon, I found a small population of Hebrew people there. They'd been taken there against their will - some decades earlier. They didn't want to be there. They talked about wanting to go home. And for me, either motivated by a passionate commitment to human rights, or pragmatically not really caring about other people's prisoners, I saw no need to keep them exiled. That had been Babylon's issue, not mine. With my right hand, then, I signed a royal writ - letting them go home if they wanted.

So - if you're going to get all poetic, a bit symbolic, about my right hand, you've got a couple of options. If someone were to grab my right hand, they might be grabbing my fighting hand - my sword wielder - my capacity to injure. Or you might be grabbing the hand I use to gesture towards the army I have at my disposal - my capacity to persuade others militarily - a

hand revealing my power. Or you could be grabbing the hand with which I put my signature to another's freedom - my capacity to cancel set people free. Or here's another thought. Remember that left is sinister, and right is dextrous! Maybe grabbing the right hand is grabbing someone's skill or better nature - their capacity to do righteousness, to create. (I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I, the Lord do all these things.) And so: my violence. My powers of persuasion. My capacity to set others free. My better nature and creativity.

God says to Cyrus "Though you do not know me, I have taken you by your right hand, to subdue nations, to open doors, to cut through bars of iron. I arm you, though you do not know me . . ." Not sure what to do with what God says to Cyrus, since, as Cyrus says "I'm not all that interested in God". Back to Cyrus.

My name is Cyrus. Not all of the Hebrews went home immediately. Some of them chose to stay on in Babylon. That didn't greatly concern me. The important thing, for me, was that their staying on was now a matter of their own choosing. If I'm the great defender of human rights, I'd done the right thing, broken their chains. And if I'm simply the pragmatic politician, then I'd achieved political advantage by lancing the boil of any on-going resentment. One less reason for people to create civil disorder. Either way, the ones staying on weren't a problem anymore - and as I say, there were only a handful of them. The vast majority grabbed the opportunity to go home, and marched off into the West. Singing their songs, saying their prayers, getting ready to rebuild their broken house of God. Not my kind of thing, as you know. I don't care much about any house of God. One of them, within the singing, marching movement, was heard to say that God had anointed me - given me a holy purpose. He said that God had taken me by my hand, by my right hand, and even though I didn't know the God myself, wasn't remotely interested in worshipping the God myself, had become an operative of that God's purposes. ("For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.")

Surnamed by God! Declared to be part of the family, even though I don't know the surnaming God. I'm not sure I feel OK with that - being

kidnapped into someone else's agenda - turned into an anonymous Christian, as it were. Perhaps it bugs me. Or maybe I can just let it go - count it among the stuff I've decided not to sweat about. Does it matter how they interpret me? It's just another one of their irrelevant beliefs about God, and I'm not very interested in God. Maybe I'll just feel grateful that the doors have opened, that the gates have been flung wide, that mountains have fallen and bars have been broken. It's working out pretty for me. I'll be Persian; they can be Hebrew. So long as they pay their taxes and keep their peace, I'm sure it'll all be fine. My name is Cyrus, and for this morning, that's my lot.

-ooOoo-

On the similar side of a similar same coin, five hundred years later, as an epilogue, my name is Matthew. I watched a bunch of Herodians and Pharisees setting him a trap. They had what they thought was an inescapable trick question - about the emperor (not interested in God), and whether it was right to pay him taxes. His answer was so clever. "Whose image is on the coin?" They answered "the emperor's". "Quite right", he said. "So give the emperor what belongs to the emperor - and give to God what belongs to God". He'd skilfully reminded them that while there are secular authorities, and we have to pay them our dues, everything actually belongs to God - perhaps even the emperor himself. To God belongs, if not the emperor's awareness or allegiance, then at least the emperor's right hand. All things belonging to God, all things serving God, some things press-ganged by God. A pocket-picking God who steals other agendas - and turns them to good.

Cyrus professed no faith in God, yet is drawn into the family of those who seek God's purpose. Cyrus may not be interested - but found his right hand secretly grasped. For us, who **are** interested, we gladly open our hands - giving to God those things that God often claims and uses: our power, our capacity to set free, our better selves, our creative capacities. Rendering unto Caesar our money, we render unto God everything that, to God, belongs.

We will sing about this. But for now, a moment of quiet.

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