

It's difficult to believe at times that God is at work everywhere, in good times and bad, in enemies as well as friends, in poor and rich, in the stranger at the door or the immigrant freshly arrived on our seashore. God comes to us or is revealed to us in surprising ways – it's the story of Israel highlighted today in the Persian king Cyrus being chosen as Messiah, as the one who will return the Israelites to Jerusalem and allow them to rebuild the Temple. And he does so without becoming an Israelite himself, he remains a pagan with other gods. The Israelites of course could have chosen not to obey a pagan king citing the law no doubt in many instances but a greater vision is needed when such choices confront us – not a cunning sophistry as the Pharisees and Herodians display in today's gospel in an attempt to manipulate God's will but in knowing when God's will is at work and when not, when to obey and when not.

A wonderful book that came my way recently was an account of two voyages from Australia and South America to the UK by two of the last of the tall ships to sail commercially under the Red Ensign, and it's a useful counter to any romantic notions we might have with regard to life under sail. It was, from today's perspective, an incredibly tough existence for very little return

“so it went on. Rain came, and hail, and howling wind, and troubled seas. We were so often up to our necks in water to shorten sail or working our guts out to set it again....One can never forget those great seas that towered above our tops'l yards...We fought our way across the stormy ocean with hands that were raw and sore with grazes and sea cuts, muscles that ached ,and joints that cracked from the strains that we put upon them, bellies that grumbled with hunger, and bodies that were always cold and wet and yet we could get a laugh out of it....”

The author Frank Brooksmith then goes on to recount the black humour that kept them going despite a captain who treated them like dirt, for they knew their lives depended on him all the same, and on one another. They were fighting the ship in every detail in order to get home – the strong making up for the weak, every life depending on obedience. And one can interpret Jesus' response to the Pharisees in this light also – a broader vision is needed than whether to argue over the details of who pays what to whom. For the ultimate obedience is to God if we are all to reach safe harbour and within that broader vision we are asked to pay each person their due including Caesar but if Caesar is not obedient to that ultimate authority, is not paying his due to God, then the question arises as to whether Caesar deserves our due also. It's not a recipe then for blind obedience but must always have that ultimate horizon in view also. It's a matter of attention to the details of the day -which may seem far removed at times from anything Godly – and a trust in God knowing their meaning for the greater end we are all made for. This may if course then include times of rebellion in the details of the day but for the most part it's a matter of trust and deep attention or prayer. This is something we must want so it's never a case of doing something simply because we are told to – the inadmissible excuse of the Nazi. This is a useful counter to any romantic notions we might have to life under a Christian sail.

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