Sunday 29A 18/10/26

This is Jesus keeping a cool head under fire. The people who are fearful here are the Pharisees and the Herodians, fearful enough to join forces against a common threat, the threat an honest and God-fearing man presents to them, a prophet-like figure who challenges their accommodation with the world. They challenge Jesus on the issue of taxes to Caesar precisely because it's an issue on which they have already compromised themselves, and Jesus knows it, sees through their fearful duplicity. His security is otherwise, in a God who is not only creator and redeemer but creator and redeemer now, active in and through creation, including Jesus himself: to be trusted, to have hope in, to be loved and to know oneself as loved even as such as the Pharisees and Herodions attempt to coerce him into a fearful surrender to a world in which God is no longer in charge. This is the sort of confidence that Paul has and commends his brother's and sisters for in his letter to the church in Thessalonica, the church which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. They display great hope, faith and love because their security is not in themselves but in God, so much so that they can be said to live in God as God lives in them, the God in whom Paul can later say we live and move and have our being. In this sense they are gifted people all within the gift of God.

This is the sort of confidence the prophet Isaiah also displays when he predicts that Israel will be saved as a people, though not as a nation, by the Roman king Cyrus. God will use him as a Messiah to restore them to their land and to restore the temple to them in Jerusalem. This demands a radical change in the way the Jews are to think, it's just as it will be when the Romans are later in charge and taxes will have to be paid to Caesar but the change of heart called for is not one of compromise but one of an even deeper trust in God as God of all people, of all creation. The rest of chapter 45 of Isaiah is all about that.

I am Lord and there is no other,

I form the light and I create the darkness,

I make well-being and I create disaster.

You argue but I say to you *does the clay say to the potter what are you doing?"*

No, God chooses Cyrus who unwittingly does his will.

"though you do not know me, I have armed you

So that it may be known from east to west

That there is no-one except me."

Now I think one can push this to include all those other experiences one has of feeling fulfilled, of being at peace with oneself and the world, even if only momentarily.

There is a wonderful book by Nan Shepherd attempting to describe her love for being in and on the Cairngorms in Scotland, in all their threatening and isolating danger – the sudden storm, the long distances to be covered, the lack of help nearby, but the rewards of venturing out are immense. In humanist terms one finds oneself, or in Robert McFarlands words *"flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled"* and *"the body thinks best, but in myself, I am… the i amb of the 'I am", the beat of the placed and lifted foot"*.

Now I recently tried this for myself and, after an absence of forty years, it was an excruciating and humbling experience but, even so, spiritually enlightening for it made me realise that this passing body is not mine to have and to hold forever, that I may have to pay taxes to Caesar now- there is a physical cost to being alive- but there is a deeper reality at work which is not tied to our measure of success or failure, of personal or national well being, but holds true whatever is happening to us on this journey up or down the mountains we face each day. This is the tax we pay to God only to find it's already been paid for . Or to finish with a quote from the Scottish adventurer John Muir towards the end of his life in America '*going out…..was really going in*.'

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