**Isaiah 45.1-7**

45Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
   whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
   and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
   and the gates shall not be closed:
2 I will go before you
   and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
   and cut through the bars of iron,
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness
   and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
   the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
4 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.
5 I am the Lord, and there is no other;
   besides me there is no god.
   I arm you, though you do not know me,
6 so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
   and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
   I am the Lord, and there is no other.
7 I form light and create darkness,
   I make weal and create woe;
   I the Lord do all these things.

**1 Thessalonians 1.1-10**

1Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. 6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

**Matthew 22.15-22**

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ 21They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This sermon is a bit of a departure from the normal pattern: it retells today’s gospel reading, from the point of view of someone who was there.

Jerusalem was heaving. It’s always frantic at the lead up to Passover, but this year seems busier than ever. Pilgrims, traders, temple officials, all jostling together in the narrow streets, not to mention the Roman soldiers, strutting around as if they own the place. Up on the temple mount the air was buzzing with a sense of expectation. It’s hard to teach in front of so many curious visitors, while still keeping a sense of holiness for the festival.

You’re surprised at that. I know everyone likes to put the Pharisees down: they call us killjoys and they think we’re only interested in telling other people what to do. But let me just set the record straight for a moment. Our purpose is to call people back to true religion. Over the years it’s got so watered down that if we’re not careful our unique Jewish identity will be lost. The whole point of the Pharisee revival is to get back to the purity of the old days. When we’re a proper God-fearing society again, God’s favour will return to us, and then we’ll be able to throw off this foreign occupation and fulfil our destiny as his chosen people.

Well, I mustn’t get carried away. At least the Romans tolerate our religion. And that’s one reason we have to tread such a fine line with them. We can’t afford to antagonise them while they’re in charge. Of course we want to see them gone – no self-respecting Jew doesn’t – but all this agitating just plays into their hands. There’s no chance of a rebellion taking off in any case. Say what you like about the Romans, they’re ruthless enforcers. So we keep our eyes on religious law, and try and encourage the people to do the same. If only everyone would follow God’s commandments, things would be different. But they do need help to remember: there are lots of laws and it’s easy to break them without even knowing you’re doing it. We’re providing a service really, if people could only see it.

Back to my story. Jerusalem was bursting at the seams. To make matters worse, one of those crackpot preachers had arrived from up north, with a whole sea of followers in tow. They turn up sometimes, claiming to be the Messiah, God’s chosen instrument to bring about his new kingdom. They’re all ridiculous, of course, but this one was more unbelievable than most. God’s anointed king, surrounded by a ragtag army of lepers, prostitutes and children? Don’t make me laugh. Oh, he had charisma all right, and you could see the people lapping up his stories. The Romans were keeping a close eye on him: any popular movement always raises the alert. I couldn’t see this one taking off though: where were his soldiers? Even so, no one wants to upset the delicate balance of power, so we were watching closely too.

And of course, it wasn’t long before he came after the religious establishment, taking swipes at the temple management and – can you believe it – calling us hypocrites. Us, who comb the scriptures for God’s instructions, and share them with the people! It was infuriating, but we had to tread carefully. His followers might be unarmed but there are plenty of them, and the last thing we want around Passover is a riot. We tried ignoring him but he kept popping up in the temple courtyard, wanting to debate with us. Of course he’s misguided, but he’s clever with it, and he certainly knows his scripture. He’s got an answer for anything.

Today, though, we really thought we had him nailed. The people think he’s their next king. The Son of David, they call him – and who is the Messiah but David’s son? (Of course, most of them have a very unsophisticated concept of the Messiah. He’s nothing more than a freedom fighter as far as they’re concerned – they have no idea of the judgement of the righteous, or the coming kingdom of God.) But the preacher isn’t saying if he is or isn’t the chosen one. He’s playing his cards close to his chest, biding his time, so we came up with a way to get him to declare himself. We collected witnesses, and set him up with a simple question: Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor? If he says no, that’s the end of the road for him. The Romans will whisk him off and crucify him for insurrection. If he says yes, that’s the end of the road for his movement. The prophecies say that the Messiah will reign over David’s kingdom and shatter the yoke of the oppressor. You don’t do that by meekly paying taxes to a foreign overlord, and the people know it. They’ll lose faith and wander off to follow some other zealot. Either way, we can breathe easier again and Passover will be safeguarded for another year.

Except that’s not quite what happened. He thought about the question for a moment. Then he asked for a Roman coin, held it up and asked what was on it. Any fool knows that – at least anyone who’s had to pay the tax. The emperor, in all his glory, with his imperial titles and his pretensions to being a god. Spelt out like that it makes my flesh crawl. There is no God but the Lord Almighty. Who is this Caesar with his pomp and status, who wants us all to bow down to him? I hoped the preacher would drop the coin in the dust. Instead, he handed it back. “Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor,” he said. “And give to God what belongs to God.” That was all. Some of the people looked a bit disappointed. So, pay your taxes, then: not just the imperial tax but the temple tax as well. But to be honest I don’t think that’s all he meant. Humming behind his words I could feel something else.

Let the emperor be, he seemed to be saying, with his delusions of grandeur and his imperial titles. Let him have his gold coins. It’s all insignificant beside the glory of our God. I thought of the words of the prophet Isaiah, how even the heathen ruler Cyrus was an instrument of God. Isn’t Caesar also under God’s hand? All the power and wealth of the world is nothing in God’s sight, for creation belongs to him alone. Just for a moment an image of a different kind of future swam into my head, of a ruler who doesn’t rely on money and power and soldiers to cement his kingdom; where no one has to jostle for status and influence because everyone belongs. The words of another prophecy came back to me: “Here is my chosen servant in whom I delight… he will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smouldering wick.” The rabbis say that’s another prediction of the Messiah. But it doesn’t sound much like a conquering hero; no ruler I ever heard of won control of a kingdom that way.

I still feel a bit dazed though, as if a veil has been pulled aside but my vision hasn’t yet come into focus. Whatever you make of this preacher, he challenges you to think. The second part of his answer sticks in my mind: Give to God what belongs to God. We know what the Law says: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. Such a simple proposition; so hard to do, even with all our codes of behaviour to help us. At least we Pharisees are trying, not like the preacher and the messy rabble he surrounds himself with. But all the same I can’t help wondering: Has this Galilean nobody seen something we’ve missed? What if all the power games are getting in the way of our service to God?

The preacher’s followers haven’t abandoned him yet, although it’s only a matter of time. They’ll come to realise he won’t lead them to glory. His kind only ever ends up on the gallows. But you have to hand it to him: he has the knack of making every one of them feel wanted, no matter what they are or what they’ve done. Just like the psalm says, “He will take pity on the weak and needy, for they are precious in his sight.” Almost as if the kingdom of heaven was already here.