

God's Unwitting Accomplice

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Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

Does God dupe people into doing what he wants? Does he use them to accomplish his goals without their knowledge? This Sunday's first reading presents just such a puzzling question. Somehow, God's providence pulls together those who don't even know his name and employs them for his own designs. The mystery of God's unwitting accomplices might shed some light on how it is that he can "work all things for good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28 NAB).

Context

This passage from the beginning of Isaiah 45 falls in the second part of the Book of Isaiah, often referred to as the Book of Comfort (chapters 40-66). The book as a whole points to the Babylonian exile as a punishment from God for his people's infidelity and also to the eventual collapse of Babylon as a moment of redemption. While the Babylonians had exiled the Jews from their homeland, the Persian conquerors, led by Cyrus, will allow them to return home. God thus uses Babylon as an instrument of judgment, while he uses Persia as an instrument of deliverance.

Who is Cyrus?

Cyrus the Great was the founding ruler of the First Persian Empire (or Achaemenid Empire) in the sixth century B.C. While books have been written about all his accomplishments, his most significant achievement from a biblical perspective was to release the Jews who had been held captive at Babylon when he conquered it in 538 B.C. Cyrus had a more tolerant policy regarding conquered peoples than did the Babylonians. (This policy seems to be confirmed by the non-biblical Cyrus Cylinder, a cuneiform text that celebrates Cyrus' victory over Babylon.) He even allowed the Temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt (Ezra 5:13). Because of all of the help Cyrus gave to the Jews, the prophet surprisingly refers to him as "messiah" ("anointed one"), a title normally reserved for the Davidic king of Judah and of course, for the ultimate heir to the throne of David.

Cyrus, the Unwitting Savior

Isaiah 45 describes how the Lord empowers Cyrus to "subdue nations" and "ungird the loins of kings," to open doors that will not be closed again (RSV). Cyrus holds an odd position. He is not a Jew. He might not even believe in God, and yet God "anoints" him with authority and empowers him to conquer kings and peoples for the sake of his people. The reading selection leaves out verses 2 and 3, which amplify the impact of God's help to Cyrus. He precedes him into battle, breaks down doors and delivers secret treasures to this pagan king. Yet God makes clear that he is not simply stroking Cyrus' ego, but that he aids him "for the sake of Jacob," for the Jews. God calls Cyrus "by name" in order to use him to deliver his people from captivity in Babylon and return them to the Promised Land.

Divine Providence at Work

People often talk about divine providence or “God’s plan” as a way to explain the evils and sorrows of our world, but here we see the flip-side of divine providence, the good news. Here God is using a created reality, namely Cyrus, to accomplish his purpose, the purpose for which he created the world, to glorify him. Cyrus’ actions of conquering and door-smashing may look like run-of-the-mill ancient despotism and in some ways they are. But God lifts this ancient conqueror above himself, to do things which did not even intend, to deliver God’s people from their oppressors. God can even say to Cyrus “it is I who arm you, though you know me not” (Isa 45:5 NAB).

We might have a knee-jerk reaction against a greater power arming a lesser one who may have twisted purpose—one need only reflect on the Iran-Contra affair or the C.I.A.’s 1980’s Operation Cyclone in Afghanistan—but the U.S. government is not omnipotent. God the Creator will not fail in the purpose for which he designed all of creation: to glorify him. He can take even the sinful and evil designs of men and bring good out of them in the end. His providence is not just a way to try and explain away the lousy stuff in life, but it reveals the fact that God succeeds in the end, that everyone and everything really will give glory to him.

The Bible repeatedly shows how God upends our expectations, how he loves paradox. He brings good out of evil, lets the weak triumph over the strong, makes the wisdom of the world foolish and even brings renewed life out of the most violent of deaths. This prophetic passage about Cyrus gives us hope that God knows what he is up to. The darkness around us can close in and even lead us to doom-and-gloom mentality where it seems that our Lord’s purposes for the world are being undone. Yet somehow, even in the midst of the blackest tragedies, he can reach out to us through the most unexpected person or event. If he can use an ancient conqueror as a Gentile Messiah for his Chosen People, then how much more can he use us and his unwitting accomplices in our world to bring his Creation that much closer to its final goal of giving glory to its Creator?