

21st Sunday after Pentecost / October 18th

First Illumination: Isaiah (45:1-7)

Our first reading comes from the second half of Isaiah, spoken to God's people in exile in Babylon, more than five hundred years before Christ. A new power was rising in the east: Cyrus, king of Persia. He would soon conquer Babylon and send the exiles home to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple. Cyrus is the only foreign king in Scripture called the Lord's "anointed" — in Hebrew, mashiach, messiah. Listen for the phrase God repeats to this mighty king: "though you do not know me."

Psalm Illumination: 96

Psalm 96 is one of the "enthronement psalms," songs that proclaim, "The Lord is King!" A version of it was sung when David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. The psalm pokes fun at the idols of the nations with a Hebrew pun: gods are elohim, but idols are elilim, "nothings." Then comes a word repeated three times: "ascribe," to give God what is rightly due. Listen for what we are told to bring when we come into God's courts.

Epistle Illumination: First Thessalonians (1:1-10)

First Thessalonians is probably the oldest writing in the New Testament, written around the year 50, about twenty years after the resurrection. Thessalonica was the capital of Roman Macedonia, a proud city on Rome's great highway. Paul was run out of town after a short stay, accused of "saying that there is another king named Jesus." Now he writes to the small church he left behind, and he cannot stop giving thanks. Listen for the three words Paul would later make famous: the work of faith, the labor of love, and the steadfastness of hope.

Gospel Illumination: Matthew (22:15-22)

We are still in the Temple, in the last week of Jesus' life. The tax was paid to Rome with a silver denarius, about a day's wage, bearing the face of the emperor Tiberius and the words "son of the divine Augustus." The Pharisees resented the tax; the Herodians served a king who ruled by Rome's favor. When Jesus asks, "Whose head is this?" the Greek word is eikōn, image — the same word Genesis uses when God creates humankind "in his image." Listen for whose image is on the coin.

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