

Week 29

Today we see Jesus, aware of the net tightening about him, aware of the malice that stirs the questioners, yet able to deflect that malice and elude the net, for, as he knew, his time had not yet come.

¹*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* The question was inflammatory and Jesus knew it. His answer was rational and simply given: he asked for a coin and then replied: *Whose likeness and inscription is this?* And on hearing that it was Caesar's, he answered: *Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.*

But the simplicity of his response masks a deeper reality and though he advocated paying taxes, rendering to Caesar his own coinage, nevertheless the implication was far more radical. For if ownership is recognised in the stamp and seal of the maker on each created item, then surely, whilst the coinage of the world may bear the face of the ruling monarch, nevertheless we might ask whose likeness, whose stamp and seal, the monarch bears?

Jesus appears to support the status quo of Roman occupation, but underlying his spoken response is he not attesting to his Father, Creator of all, attesting to what dues

¹ Matthew 22.20-21

humankind must render to the One in whose image and likeness we are all made, to the One whose stamp and seal we bear ?

Sometimes the Lord sees fit to employ men and women for His good purpose who, at a first glance, you and I might not think to choose. Cast your mind back to Jesus' genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab and the wife of Uriah, women whose hearts the Lord knew, but whose outward appearance has often been misunderstood down the centuries. And when Jesus came to choose his disciples, would we have chosen Matthew, a tax collector working with the occupying army ? But as we hear so many times the Lord does not see as we see, for the Lord ²looks on the heart

And so, Cyrus King of Persia found himself commissioned by God, chosen for the work entrusted to him: ³*to subdue nations and strip kings, to open doors, that gates might not be closed. He was told that God would go before him, levelling mountains, sundering doors of bronze and bars of iron. And for this Cyrus was promised the treasures of darkness and hoards in secret places ... that you might know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel... there is no other. And why ? For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen I call you by your name.*

² 1 Samuel 16.7

³ Isaiah 45.1-6

We can echo Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans: *⁴O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways.* We can also marvel at the breadth of God's plan of salvation, for it was written of this same Cyrus, King of Persia in the Book of Ezra: *⁵ Thus says Cyrus King of Persia: the Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.*

And we too have some part to play in God's wonderfully wise plan of salvation, though we may be unaware of the significance of it at the time. It may only be a look, a smile, a word of consolation, a gesture of comfort, or simply a being steady and trustful in days that are difficult: a witness to hope in the promises of Christ.

⁴ Romans 11.33

⁵ Ezra 1.1-4