

Isaiah 45: 1-7 Matthew 22: 15-22 – Messages of Authority

Sunday 22 October 2023 – 8.00am

One of the many treasures of the British Museum is the Cyrus Cylinder. It dates back to the year 539BC, and was found in ancient Babylon. It doesn't look very special – a clay object, about 8 inches long, covered with a mass of tiny lines and squares – but is recognised as bearing a great message. The lines and squares are cuneiform script: it's royal propaganda, boasting of victories and conquests by Persian King Cyrus. But then instead of boasting about captives taken and cities destroyed, King Cyrus goes on to announce freedom to captives in Babylon, restoration temples destroyed in battle and encouragement for the different religions of his empire. In modern times this little clay cylinder has been called a first charter of human rights, an early statement of religious toleration.

Cyrus appears in the prophecies of Isaiah 45. For the previous five chapters, the prophet has been trying to get the people to have a change of mind-set. They have been powerless exiles for a long time, but now he needs them to see a time of new possibility is emerging. They need a total rethink, and they need to begin their rethink by realising God is greater than they'd ever imagined. The poetry of the prophecy gives visions of God making heaven and earth, measuring the oceans in his hands, and regarding the nations as a mere drop in the bucket. This is no tribal deity, but the God of all the world. Israel's God will send his servant to release them.

Who is the servant? Isaiah 45: 1 – 'This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I hold.' At that point, Cyrus's Persians looked like yet another conquering army bringing yet more destruction. But no, says the prophet. This foreigner, who does not acknowledge the Lord, still is the Lord's servant and will carry out his purposes. (Later on, we discover he will also get his come-uppance for his pretensions to universal rule.) For now, the poetry of the prophecy, and the actions of a foreign king, together communicate the message of the total authority of God.

Roman emperors communicated their authority in many ways, but one of the most effective was to have the image of their heads stamped on coins across the empire. This way, every person in the empire would get to see them. This way, every transaction in the empire would be under the symbol of his authority. And they all had to use it as they all had to pay taxes. But one place Roman coinage was not used was in the Jerusalem Temple. To pay temple-tax, you had to use temple currency – hence the money-changers.

It was here that the Pharisees and Herodians challenged Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. They thought they'd got him: either he'll say yes and he's a collaborator; or he'll say no and he's a revolutionary. By getting them to produce a Roman coin, Jesus' highlights their own hypocrisy: if they hate it so much, why are they even carrying it, in the temple of all places? Are they so attached to Roman money? Jesus is quite off-hand: whose is the picture? Caesar's? Well, give it him back then. You don't really need it, do you? But render to God what's God's – not just the temple coins. What truly bears the divine image is the human being, for we were all made in the image of God. Give your whole self over to God, not just some trifling coins.

This passage is often misused as if Jesus is simply saying there are two areas – religious and secular, church and state – keep them separate and put some money in each pot. He's not. Jesus is clearly distancing himself from the revolutionaries – the zealots and *sicarii* who preached violent revolution to overthrow the Roman state. But he is not simply accepting that state either. God's authority is over all rulers - over Caesar as over King Cyrus centuries before; and over our modern governments, centuries later. Whether they acknowledge God or not, God is capable of using their plans in unexpected ways, ones we cannot begin to imagine. And even though they don't recognise it, all authority ultimately comes from God and is to be used appropriately. God gives today's prophets authority to call human authorities back to God's ways.

Jesus stood before his critics – Pharisees and Herodians – as he would later before the powers of his day – the Jewish Sanhedrin, King Herod, and imperial governor Pontius Pilate. They all claimed great authority, but failed to notice true authority in the face of God's Son. Rejected by humans, he was vindicated by God, raised from the dead and exalted to reign on high. This is the message of authority that matters.