

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## A Smart Answer?

Is what happens in today's Gospel nothing more than a glib response to a malicious question, a smart evasion to get out of a tight corner? Not likely. The Church of Christ doesn't save such things; rather it treasures the Word of God and ponders it for centuries. So what is the true depth - the *holiness* - of the saying of Jesus about God and Caesar?

### Cyrus Christ

That's the extraordinary title Isaiah bestows on the Persian Great King: *Cyrus, the Lord's Anointed*. This is a remarkable poke in the eye for Isaiah's Jewish audience, shivering from eighty years of Gentile-imposed exile in Babylon; but the deed of Cyrus will be to return the People of a God he does not know to their ancestral homeland and its capital, Jerusalem. Thus he deserves to be called "anointed by God" (= *messiah*). His holding of the title, however, takes nothing from the God who chooses him ("takes him by the right hand"); the good deeds of Cyrus are at the inspiration of Israel's God.

### Out Of The Depths

From the awfulness of exile Isaiah had the wisdom to recognise Cyrus in those terms. If a Davidic King had still reigned in Jerusalem, I doubt if it would have been possible. As it was, Isaiah's insight made possible a different attitude to the other nations - the Gentiles - and even to other religions. Maybe the Persians were a no-go area for Jews: but clearly not for God. So from a shuddering horror at the thought of paganism, Isaiah moves to a change of mind. But then, he was a prophet; and prophets so often are not listened-to in their own times, let alone afterwards. The Jews of our Lord's day were as frozen in antipathy to Gentiles as ever; we can hear the shocked tone even of Jesus, who is astonished to find more faith in a Roman Centurion than in Israel.

### Any Tax For Caesar?

So to our Lord's dilemma in the Gospel: is it lawful (that means *in God's eyes*) to pay taxes to a Gentile Emperor who has laid his

impious hands on the Holy Land and its Chosen People? Jesus is courageous. He knows that the Romans have actually done good things for Palestine: no-one could deny that Roman rule brought benefits, not least the peace - *Pax Romana* - imposed by the ever-present Roman Army. Furthermore, as he graphically points out to his inquisitors, they all have the hated bronze image of Tiberius clinking in their pockets and purses: we are all immersed in "the world" that doesn't live by God's Law. So our hearts may be Jewish or Christian, but we all have Mammon in our purses.

### Image Of Caesar, Image Of God

"Whose image is on this coin?" The Greek word for image is *eikon*, already a religious word for us, and already known to Jewish ears: the first commandments forbids *the making of an image to worship it*, and Roman Emperors made images of themselves to be worshipped in far corners of the Empire. But Jews also knew that they were themselves images, because in Genesis *God made man in the image of himself*. So although we may not make an image of God, God may make an image of himself: as he has done already, in us. So we are eikons of the living God. Now we are ready to understand what Jesus says in our Gospel. Give to Caesar his coin, with its brazen pagan image: he stamped it, it belongs to him. But give to God *his* image - that is, yourself - because your likeness to him is his own creation, and already marks you as his.

### He Is The Image Of The Unseen God

St Paul speaks of Jesus as *the eikon of the unseen God*; and since God became Man, it has become licit for us to depict him in human terms. No-one knows for certain what Jesus looked like, though there is a conventional picture of him which has made people say they do. But the fact is that *the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we saw his glory*. It was the incarnate God, standing in our midst, who said: *Give to God what belongs to God*. This giving, in the Mass, is our religion. *Fr Philip*

