

GOD AND CAESAR

‘Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus...’ What on earth is going on? Cyrus was a Persian, not a Jew, a Gentile king, Cyrus the Great, whose empire was the greatest in the ancient world – and God calls him his ‘anointed’, that is ‘Messiah’, which means ‘anointed one’. It is quite extraordinary. Cyrus may have been powerful, and a conqueror, but he wasn’t a tyrant like many kings of his time; by the standards of the day, his rule was relatively enlightened, and God uses this pagan ruler to be his agent in restoring the fortunes of Israel. God said to him: ‘For the sake of...Israel my chosen, I call you by name...though you do not know me.’ (*Isaiah 45.4*) And it was Cyrus who brought the exile of the Jews to Babylon to an end, and the temple at Jerusalem was restored.

Move on six hundred years, and Jesus is teaching in that temple, confronting the leaders of his day, challenging them to change their ways. An example was his parable of the Wedding Banquet which we heard last week. Not for the first time have the chief priests and the Pharisees felt the lash of his tongue. To them, the religious elite, he is insufferable, an uneducated Galilean carpenter. Rather than do the right thing like Cyrus, they decide that something must be done to silence him. But what? He’s popular; the people hang on his words, and he has performed some notable cures. To arrest him would risk a riot, and that might provoke reprisals from the Romans. The only way is to undermine his popular support. They decide to try to trap him in his own words.

Three times they try to catch him out with an awkward question. Today we heard their first attempt. With flattering words about his sincerity as a teacher but with malice in their hearts, they ask him about the legitimacy of paying the Roman poll-tax, a hated exaction that caused riots when it was introduced. The question is obviously a trap, and Jesus is aware of their malice. But they have put him on the spot: if he says, 'Pay the tax,' then he would lose much popular support; if he says, 'No, don't pay,' then he will be denounced to the Romans and arrested. Instead he calls for a coin and asks whose it is. 'The emperor's,' they reply. So, Jesus says, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

This reads like a piece of political equivocation designed to get him out of tight corner, but Jesus did not go in for that kind of thing. His reply is not to be read evenly, but with the emphasis on the second part: 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, **and to God the things that are God's.**' This is not a politician avoiding the question, but the Son of God establishing priorities. For God's sake, he says, sort yourselves out; this business about the poll tax is insignificant compared to your duty to honour God in your hearts. He leaves them with the unspoken question: 'Where are your hearts fixed?'

The irony is that the chief priests and the Pharisees chose a question that actually reinforced the whole point of Jesus' teaching. They required him to make a choice between God and Caesar, between human and divine authority. This was precisely the challenge with which Jesus faced them, with the clear message that their concern to maintain their own power and authority was separating them from God, even though they believed that they were acting in God's name. Where were their hearts really fixed?

The coming of Jesus was what is called a *kairos* moment. *Kairos* is one of the Greek words for time. *Chronos* means clock time; *kairos* means significant time, as in the phrase ‘the time has come’. A *kairos* moment is when we are stopped in our tracks, the truth hits us, and we realise that things can’t go on as before – as Cyrus realised. The coming of Jesus was, of course, the greatest *kairos* moment. In his presence people were confronted by the truth, and his message to rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike, was that things can’t go on as they have been. He offered a new way to God, and a new way of relating to one another. This was a direct challenge to the leaders of Israel and the society they had created. Not surprisingly they didn’t like it, and they tried to trap him.

I think that for many years we have been living through a *kairos* moment. Global warming is the most alarming sign of this, and it’s been with us for over thirty years. There have been other signs: the financial crash of 2008, the huge and growing gap between rich and poor, the appalling catalogue of abuse of children and vulnerable adults – from Jimmy Saville to Harvey Weinstein, militant Islamists, the persecution of minorities like the Rohingya people in Myanmar, and now the Coronavirus pandemic. Our hearts are in the wrong place; things can’t go on as before. There is something wrong with the society we have created. We live in a time of reckoning, a prolonged *kairos* moment, in which God is holding up a mirror and asking us if we like what we see? There can be few among us who like what they see, but I wonder how many look more deeply and see that what we face is not just an economic or a health crisis, nor an ethical or a political crisis, but a spiritual crisis?

These are spiritually lean times; we have lost the shared moral framework that alone provides a safeguard against wickedness and

folly in both public and private life. When things go wrong, the cry is for more controls, better procedures; they may help, but what we really need, I think, are stronger spirits, a renewed inner moral sense. We are worshipping the wrong things, idols of our own making. Jesus says to us: 'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but **give to God the things that are God's.**'

It is clear from the way God used Cyrus as his agent, that he will use any leader of goodwill to achieve his purposes. The challenge that Jesus posed to the leaders of his day is also God's challenge to the leaders of our day, and indeed it is God's challenge to all of us. We Christians have much to offer in responding to this challenge. God has shown us in Jesus the values and attitudes that make for a truly human life, a life that allows all people to flourish. Ever since he walked the earth we have seen how God wants us to be. He calls men and women today, particularly us, his followers, to look at our reflection in God's mirror and see if it is Christlike, and if it is not, to change our ways so that our lives, values and attitudes are modelled on Jesus. St Paul praised the Christians at Thessalonica precisely because they did this. Their deeds spoke eloquently of their faith. The neighbouring peoples, he said, had noticed how they 'turned from idols, to serve a living and true God...' It is in Jesus, the true and living way, that we see the way forward if we want to sort ourselves out.