

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A

First Reading Isaiah 45: 1, 4–6

This part of the Book of Isaiah was written as the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon was coming to an end in the mid sixth century BC. The Jewish people had been forced into exile following the cruel destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. But now Isaiah includes a startling prophecy about Cyrus the Great (d. 530 BC), the pagan King of Persia, who will allow the people of God to return to their homeland, along with a commission to rebuild the Temple.

As Nicholas King SJ points out in his commentary to *The Bible: A Study Bible freshly translated* (2013), 'Israel's unique God is utterly powerful, able to do things that they had never thought of; therefore it is possible that God can work through unbelieving people like Cyrus'.

'Thus says the Lord ...'

These words (45: 1) follow on from the preceding verse (44: 28), where Cyrus is first mentioned as the shepherd who will fulfil God's whole purpose.

('Shepherd' is a standard Middle Eastern image for a king.)

'... to his anointed, Cyrus'



Now the Lord addresses his words to Cyrus, calling him 'his anointed'. The Hebrew word *mashiakh* was a title reserved for Davidic kings, as well as some prophets and priests. It has become 'Messiah' in English. The Greek translation is *Christos*, which has given us the word Christ.

'... whom he has taken by his right hand'

The Lord will support Cyrus, who will not only release the Jews from captivity but also help with the rebuilding of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Cyrus will be given all he needs to succeed in this revolution in the Middle East, for the sake of Israel.

'Though you do not know me ...'

Though Cyrus is a pagan ruler who does not acknowledge the God of Israel, he seems to have practised religious tolerance throughout his empire. It is likely that he followed Zoroaster, the monotheistic prophet, which may have given him greater sympathy for the one true God of the Israelites.

Gospel Matthew 22: 15–21

The Pharisees have been the target of Jesus's previous teachings, and are keen to keep to the truce they have reached with Rome which allows them to practise their religion freely. In this passage they seek unlikely allies in the Herodians to try and entrap Jesus.

The Herodians

As their name implies, they are supporters of the dynasty of Herod, the puppet kings Rome has appointed to rule Galilee. They are absolutely loyal to Rome.

The Trap: 'Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'

This is a no-win question. If Jesus says yes, he loses popular support; if he says no, he gives the Pharisees grounds to have him arrested as a revolutionary.

The taxes

A census tax had been collected since the year 6 AD, paid by men and women between the ages of 14 and 65. Paying one's taxes was a kind of tribute to Rome.

One denarius

This was the Roman currency, worth about a day's wages. Striking your own money was a sign of sovereignty over a people and the Romans attached great importance to this symbol. Other currencies were in circulation at the time, but only with Roman permission.

'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God'

Jesus defuses the debate by this answer.

There is no doubt that the coins belong to Caesar: his face is on them, but then what belongs to God? The Jews will have been

familiar with phrases like *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it* (Psalm 24: 1).



Over the years, the disciples came to understand the necessity and the rationale of dealing with civil authorities and with the authority of God (Romans 13: 1–7 and 1 Peter 2: 13–17).