



Coin of Decision

As the election approaches, a Sunday Gospel this October prompts reflection on the place of politics in Christian life.

“Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” the Pharisees ask Jesus: If He says “Yes,” He’s in favor of Roman domination. If He says, “No,” He’s a rebel who wants to throw out the oppressors from Italy. It’s a well-set trap. Either reply promises to divide those who might come together in the footsteps of the One Who proclaims a new Kingdom of peace.

But Jesus responds in a way His questioners don’t expect: “Show Me the coin and tell Me whose image and inscription it bears.” “It’s Caesar’s,” they reply. Well, then, our Lord answers, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s.” The snare has been broken, and He has stepped free.

But not for long, for the life of the Beloved Son unfolds between two death sentences: in His first days King Herod “killed all the male children in Bethlehem” under two years old, and on His last day Pilate “delivered Him to be crucified.”

From beginning to end Jesus unsettled political power. At His trial the tension bursts out front and center in the discussion with Pilate. “Do you not know that I have the power to release You or the power to crucify You?” speaks the voice of Roman law. To this the defenseless Jew retorts, “You would have no power over Me unless it were given you from above.”

The two-sided coin of decision comes down to us with the Gospel.

What belongs to God? Authority does. Through the prophet Isaiah the God of Abraham spoke to the Persian King Cyrus: “I am the Lord, and there is no other. It is I who arm you, though you know Me not.” Centuries later St. Paul made the same point: “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.”

What belongs to God? Life does. It comes to be at the will of the Creator. Truth does too. “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth,” Jesus tells Pilate.

What belongs to Caesar? The image on a coin, we could say, the image of an image of God; for “God created man in His own image.” Caesar is not God but man; a creature, not the Creator; a recipient of life, not its giver. Caesar is not the maker of truth; he is made for the truth.

Therefore, it “belongs to Caesar” to establish earthly justice and peace, to keep violence and rapaciousness in check, to lighten the burden of poverty, to lift the weight of oppression.

The Old Testament highlights two forms of Caesar-like rule. Pharaoh the Egyptian enslaved the Israelites and forbade them to set out for the Promised Land. He used political power to oppress the people God had chosen as His own. Cyrus the Persian freed the children of Abraham and opened the way for their return to the Promised Land. He put political power at the service of the Israel of God.

God raised up Cyrus unexpectedly. Perhaps He has leaders in waiting who will surprise us again, leaders who do not ask us to render to Caesar what belongs to God.