



October 18th

THE NEW SHOFAR

God has called us to a life of service

The ways of God should not be presumed!

Thus says Yahweh to his anointed, to Cyrus,

It is difficult to relate this reading from Isaiah to situations in our world today. Cyrus was the pagan king of Persia. The leader of a mighty army that had swept all before it. The Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon and the land of Canaan, the Land of Milk and Honey lay in ruins. Hopelessness was the currency of the day. How could a pagan king be the hope of Israel? Look at what God goes on to say: *For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.*

The hope of Israel is now in the hands of an unbelieving pagan king! Was there no one in Israel God could raise up to lead His people home? No king, priest, noble or prophet able to be entrusted with the herculean task? God's answer is a resounding No!

God gives this pagan emperor a *surname*. This gives him a special and most intimate relationship with God. He is called Israel's messiah – anointed one. God can make use of anyone and anything to bring the world the divine gift of salvation. Israel is told, in the most brutal way, if they fail to produce the fruit God seeks, the divine focus will move elsewhere. They are 'special' only as long as they keep the covenant.

The repercussions for the Church today are resoundingly clear. There is no justification for any of us – individuals or parish communities - sitting back basking in the glory of being called by God and thinking our status guarantees our place in the Heavenly Throne Room. The Hebrew people offer us a sobering point for reflection. God can shower His mercy, love and salvation on the world through anyone – even someone like a "Cyrus".

Give the emperor the emperor's things, and to God the things that are God's.'

The Palestine of Jesus was an occupied land struggling under the rule of Rome. It was not always a peaceful relationship between the two countries and not long after the death of Jesus, the land burst into violent revolution and Jerusalem along with its Temple was destroyed. Thus, anything to do with the demands of the occupiers was a discussion fraught with dangers. The Pharisees had been planning since 12:14 to have Jesus arrested and dealt with and with this in mind they approached Him with this question. They first try to flatter Jesus with compliments they simply do not believe and then tease him with what they considered to be an unanswerable question... *Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?*

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This was the annual head tax that Rome levied on all men, women and slaves between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five. If Jesus said “no” then they could report him to the Romans as being a revolutionary. If Jesus said “yes” they could do harm to His reputation among the ordinary people of the land as being an unworthy prophet who supported the hated occupiers. It seemed to the Pharisees that there was no way out of this difficulty.

Jesus however was sharper than his opponents had anticipated. He asked for a coin, the coin used to pay the head tax. They brought to Him a denarius as the tax had to be paid in Roman coinage. The common coinage at that time was one that had the image of the emperor Tiberius on it and under the image were the words – *Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest*. Not surprisingly, the Jews hated the image and the idolatry it celebrated. But Jesus used this coin and asked simply: *whose image is on this coin?* The answer was obvious: *Caesar’s*. The response to that admission was that because the image of Caesar was on the coin it was his coin. In paying the tax all the Jews were doing was returning the coin to its owner. No problem there. The sting, however, is in the second part of his reply. As they give to Caesar what is his due, so too they must give to God what is due to God.

As disciples of Christ we have two equal responsibilities. We have to take up our full range of responsibilities as men and women in God’s creation. Our work, our recreation, all that we do is a part of our collaboration with the ongoing creative activity of God. All that we do to contribute to the world, to grow in the fullness of our humanity and to assist others to become fully human and fully alive is sacred work. This is what we are created to be doing and so there is no time in our life when we can sit back and say that we have done all that has been asked of us. That giving will continue until our last breath and even that final gasp is a part of what we can offer to others as a gift from God.

Live in the world according to the will of God as revealed in Christ

But Jesus adds a further dimension to this sacredness of human activity. He tells his questioners they must *give to God what belongs to God*. He means not only our daily activities but our daily activities as they are lived out under his teachings on the Kingdom. What God wants from all of us is to be living according to the Way of the Kingdom, a Way that is spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount as well as in the parables on the Kingdom of God.

It is not men and women who decide what is right and wrong, what “being human” means and what responsibilities we have as human beings in creation. These are set out by the One who created us, who sustains us and who calls us to live with him for eternity. That Way is revealed to us in Jesus. The more we imitate Jesus, the more we follow his teachings and example, the more we understand God’s will and more open we are to the abundance of blessings God seeks to shower upon us. Then and only then will the world truly be as God created it to be.

Cyrus stands as a point of reflection for us. If God can go around a recalcitrant Israel and choose a pagan king as His messiah, we are not as indispensable as we may think.