

Homily for 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

by Fr Anton Webb

Lady Astor was the first elected female MP to take her seat in the House of Commons in 1919. Never one to mince her words, she is alleged to have once said to Winston Churchill, "If you were my husband, I'd put poison in your coffee." To which Churchill retorted, "Madam, if you were my wife, I'd drink it." Commenting on there now being a woman in Parliament, Churchill said to her that it was like having one intrude on him in the bathroom, to which she retorted, "You're not handsome enough to have such fears."

As well as finding such stories amusing, I admire the quick-wittedness of these people. How often have I thought of a witty response hours after the event! Apparently, such a delay is referred to as "staircase wit," and I am sure many of us have found ourselves in such a situation, coming up with a good line but too late for it to have any effect!

Jesus was certainly quick-witted in today's Gospel. His enemies were trying to catch him out and land Him in a lot of trouble. At that time their land was being ruled by the Romans who demanded a heavy tax from them. A group of people called the Zealots had previously tried to cause an uprising against the Romans to throw off their control. Many had been arrested and put to death by the Romans. The Pharisees who quiz Jesus would not have agreed with what the Zealots did, but they would have had sympathy with their intention of being sovereign and free from foreign domination. The Herodians, on the other hand, were those of the people who colluded with the Romans in order to gain wealth and power. So the Herodians and Pharisees normally would have had little to do with each other. But in the question they put to Him, they are united in their attempt *to trap Jesus in what he said*.

Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar? If he said Yes, He would lose the people's credibility as a religious leader; if he said No, He could be accused of being a Zealot and an enemy of the Roman Power. His response, *Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar — and to God what belongs to God*, does not implicate Him in any wrongdoing. And asking them to show Him a Roman coin portrays the Pharisees as working with the Roman system even by spending Roman coins. What great sharpness of mind!

If we stop here and simply admire Our Lord's wit, we have not even scraped the surface of His message. The English translation of the passage does not help. Concerning the design on the coin, in this English version Jesus asks, *Whose head is this?* The original Greek has *eikōn* which means "image" or "likeness". So if we hear Jesus asking, more correctly, "Whose image/likeness is this?" our minds might go back to the beginning of Genesis where it is written that God makes man and woman in His own image and likeness (cf Gen. 1:26,27). Understood in this way, Jesus' response to his foes is actually saying: give to Caesar his coins, but give to God your entire selves, body and soul, in whose image and likeness you have been made.

The Caesar dynasty claimed to be divine. But all earthly power will fade away. In the words of the Psalm: *God is king; He is the Lord of glory and power; the Lord is great...to be feared above all gods*, and, in fact, *the gods of the heathens are naught*. Even the great foreign King Cyrus, in the First Reading, who in an earlier time freed God's people from domination and brought them back from exile to their own land, is only powerful because God allows it. He calls Cyrus by his name and confers on him a title.

Whether we are small or great in this life, let us daily offer ourselves body and soul to the Lord, that we may truly work with Him in his providential plan for us and our world. Let us place all our hope and trust in Him, confident in our belief that *from the rising to the setting of the sun...apart from God, all is nothing*.