

Sunday 18th October 2020 (Trinity 19) ‘Where is our allegiance?’ Fr. Mike.

- **Exodus 33.12-23**
- **Psalm 99.1-9**
- **1Thess 1.1-10**
- **Matthew 22.15-22**

Background

The Gospel reading today begins with a strange mixture of people, Pharisees and Herodians. What unites these otherwise opposed groups against Jesus is a desire to **‘entangle him in his talk’** (v.15) and thereby destroy his credibility. So, they arrive at the place where Jesus is teaching and then - almost like a lynch-mob - push their way to the front. ‘Master’ they call out, and the crowd fall silent. ‘Master, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth,’ And, with a gesture towards the crowds, they add ‘you show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes (**‘give tribute’**) to the emperor, or not?’

Jesus was trapped: if he said ‘no’ then the Herodians would tell the authorities that he was inciting civil disobedience, the result of which would almost certainly be that Jesus would face a trial and probably execution. But, if he said ‘yes’, then the crowd who have already been crushed by Roman rule - with their wealth stripped and shipped off to Rome - and are desperate for someone to take a genuine stand against tyranny, are going to feel royally let down. They pinned their hopes on Jesus, and it would feel a huge betrayal were they to hear this popular figure advocate falling in line with the authorities, saying that when in Jerusalem, you should do as the Romans do.

So, what Jesus does is he asks for a coin. It has Caesar's head on it and he adds "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."(v.21).

The key issue of this passage rests in the meaning of this enigmatic statement.

The first clause on its own ('render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's') indicates that the tax should be paid, since the emperor's image and inscription on the coin would cause it to fall under "things that are the emperor's." On the other hand, the final clause ('and unto God the things that are God's') places a question mark on what actually belongs to whom!



The denarius which Jesus called his questioners to produce read "Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus" on one side, and "Pontifex Maximus" (high priest) on the other. The coin has Caesar's face on it, and the inscription says words to the effect that Caesar is God. Now this was so offensive to the Jews (breaking the first of the ten commandments) that to *even be in possession* of such a coin was tantamount to trafficking in graven images. If it was a Pharisee who was found to have such a coin, then Jesus will have revealed the hypocrisy of those who were giving a false impression of religious purity...

Consequently, into the reverberation of such all-encompassing and even idolatrous claims, Jesus here reasserts **God's** ownership and rule.

Given Jesus' repeated use of the Old Testament highlighted throughout Matthew, and his preaching of the arrival of God's kingdom, it is difficult to imagine that Jesus, (who used the psalms as his 'prayerbook' remember) would see much of anything falling outside of "**the things that are God's.**" "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." (Psalm 24:1) or as the opening words from today's psalm puts it: '**The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble**' (Psalm 99:1).

The beauty of Jesus' answer is that he both concedes payment of the census tax while subverting the reach of the emperor. If read one way, Jesus' answer is simply an affirmation of Christian submission to governing authorities. Yet if read from another angle, Jesus affirms the all-encompassing reach of God's ownership in a way that relativises imperial claims of right to rule. He didn't say 'YES' and he didn't say 'NO', thereby leaving it up to us to work it out for ourselves.

We know that the Pharisees had got it wrong. They believed that you were better off withdrawing from the world because - that way - you wouldn't be compromised. Ironically, they *were* compromised because their withdrawing failed to maintain the religious purity they sought to preserve.

God doesn't call us to be separate from this world. He calls us to be salt and light. You have to live the Christian life *in the world*; not in some artificial ghetto where your beliefs are never challenged. That is not God's way. God's way - is **to engage with the world**. God did not choose to stay separate from the world he created. He entered it. He experienced its cruelty. He felt its pain. That is God's way. God took our flesh. Jesus was God incarnate - in flesh - and he shared the dirt, disease and depths of our nature and our open failure to meet the ideals we believe in.

If people could see our struggle... if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable rather than give the impression that we've got all the answers, then - perhaps - people might be more attracted to the faith we're struggling to live out and - maybe - they might even learn something about God!

You see, it's not simply about paying our taxes:

It's about how to live a life that is faithful to God in a world that barely knows him...

It's about us refusing to keep our faith in a box that we only unpack in church, and honestly trying to relate it to the whole of our lives, and then struggling to put it all together...

Conclusions

You belong to God, and you are called to live your life for him in this world...

Jesus calls us (actually **all** of us) to live out our Christian life in this world even though - sometimes - our high ideals may be compromised by the realities of day-to-day life.

He calls us to live in a world that is not yet the Kingdom of God at a time in which his will is not yet done on Earth as it is in Heaven. But - despite things not yet being as they should be - we are nevertheless called to live out our faith with integrity and honesty; not believing ourselves to be anything other than we are. We are called to live out our faith in the world so that the world witnesses our struggle to relate what we believe to the way we actually live our daily lives.

Hypocrisy - such as that of the Pharisees - has done more to damage the credibility of the church than any honest and open failure to meet the ideals we believe in.

Therefore, if people could see our honest and humble struggle... if we allow ourselves to simply be that vulnerable, then perhaps other people might be more attracted to join us in that longing for a closer walk with God, as we attempt to find some semblance of openness, and ultimately an attractive spiritual integrity.

Things are rarely as presented, although most still seek an authentic set of workable values and a sincere faith.

It's about us living a secular life and thereby sharing in God's sufferings.

The image you bear (the image imprinted in you at Baptism) is not Caesar's, but God's. You bear **God's** image!

Finally, in your Christian vocation (to live life for God in the world) this daily struggle for righteousness is nurtured and further consoled by belonging to a God who promised:

'My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest' (Exod.33.14).

Amen.

(Fr. Mike)

