

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

readings: [Exodus 33.12-end](#), [I Thessalonians 1.1-10](#), [Matthew 22.15-22](#)

22 October 2023

On a few occasions over the years, I have found myself having to steer a careful path between the subtle and competing interests of local politics. That's particularly true for cathedral ministry but it has to be said that when it comes to politics nothing prepared me for being the judge at the annual fuchsia and geranium club prize giving. Never again!

In Matthew 22 Jesus is embroiled in politics. He is faced with a question – to pay taxes to the emperor or not. His response, give to the emperor what he deserves and to God what he deserves. A seemingly simple solution honouring both the civic and spiritual realms. However, inevitably, there is a story behind the story.

This interaction happens in Matthew's gospel after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple. That would have been interpreted as a Messianic action and received by the religious authorities as an undermining of their power base. So, power rears its head. There had clearly been tensions between Jesus and the Jerusalem religious authorities for some time but the temperature had undoubtedly risen since the Temple incident and in Matthew Chs 21-22 Jesus finds himself challenged again and again. In our passage Jesus says 'why are you putting me to the test?', language reminiscent of the Temptation narrative earlier in the Gospel. Things are getting highly charged. We are also told that one section of the religious leadership has joined up with the Herodians for this episode. The Herodians were an influential group that supported King Herod, who only had any power because the Roman empire had given it to him. He was a puppet king with his own agendas and it suited him to be close to the Temple leadership and Rome.

So, the religious leadership and Herodians set out to trap Jesus with a directly political question about taxation. The tax in question is the Roman poll tax, a most despised tax. The Romans had invaded Palestine in 63BC, stolen the land and then demanded high levels of tax, to be paid in their currency. There had been a recent violent rebellion about this tax which had not ended well. The Romans were merciless in crushing it. Even so, many would not touch Roman currency because it spoke of oppression but also bore the image of the emperor and an inscription claiming that the emperor was the Son of God, High Priest. (Idolatrous) This is the background to the greasy flattery that is their opening gambit to Jesus, playing on his reputation for total honesty, 'tell us then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' If Jesus says pay it, he's a compromiser with Rome, if he says don't pay it, he could be accused of being another revolutionary against Rome. It's entrapment, with consequences.

Things start to unravel when Jesus asks them to show him the hated coin, the denarius. Interestingly, he's not carrying one. In my imagination, it's an unthinking member of this group whose enthusiasm gets the better of him – you can just imagine the others wincing because one of their own number has admitted to having the coin in his possession. Not a winning start. It's almost admitting that they are in with Rome, the empire. Such compromise would be understood as idolatry and, of course, within Judaism the core text, the commandments, addresses this.

Jesus then comes up with this very clever statement. When shown the coin and the emperor's image he says, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.' How might they have understood this? You'd better pay Caesar back in his own coin could sound revolutionary or it could sound like he's telling them to pay. Ambiguous.

It's the second phrase that shows us where Jesus is going and suddenly lands this in 22nd October 2023. 'Give to God the things that are God's.' Suddenly, this ceases to be about taxation and becomes a question about allegiance. Who are you lined up with? Which empire's blessing do you seek? What have you done to get what you want? Look how you are compromised. Jesus is not giving an answer for all time on the relationship between God and civic authorities (that is a very keen debate that needs to be attended to). He's not even speaking about taxation. No, this is about who has your prior allegiance in all things? Jesus' words evoke the call to worship – read Psalm 96.7-8a Give to God alone the glory.

So, it's about allegiance. We who reside in this kingdom are first and foremost citizens of the Kingdom of God. We pray that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. Called to be best citizens of this earthly kingdom that we can be but always nourished by the vision of God's kingdom. We look to a higher accountability. That's about discernment and wisdom for us as individuals. Seeking first the kingdom of God in priorities of our own lives. But history tells us that this applies to the Christian church as an institution as well. We need to exercise the necessary vigilance that avoids being sucked into allegiances with other empires, particularly at times of crisis when the pressure is on. This can be costly and incredibly challenging. Consider and remember in your prayers Archbishop Hosam Naoum. He is Archbishop of Jerusalem and the Middle East, which includes Lebanon, Jordan, West Bank, Gaza, Israel and Syria. But he is also looking after the neighbouring Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf and the diocese of Iran.

It's also about two different kinds of power – brutal power of the empire and the power of God. God's power appears powerless, undefended and yet in humility, vulnerability and self-offering will come up with Easter. A power (as per the Exodus reading) that refuses to overwhelm Moses but in grace and mercy enables; a power (as seen in the I Thessalonians text) that births holy joy, a faith that rings out like bells at a coronation and is always open hearted and welcoming and yes, a power, as St Paul says, that enables us to turn to God from idols to serve a living and true God.

Amen

The Very Revd Jerry Lepine