

Sunday 22nd October 2017

The Ninteenth Sunday after Trinity

First Reading: Isaiah 45: 1 - 7

Second Reading: I Thessalonians 1: 1 - 10

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22: 15 - 22

By Leslie Spatt

Yes...but what is Caesar's and what is God's?

It can be a bit confusing jumping into a story like this in the Bible without any sort of reference to what's happened just before or just after it. We've arrived here after hearing a number of parables in the last few weeks where Jesus has been talking about the Kingdom of God – two sons' differing attitudes to working in the vineyard, the tenants who beat up and kill those who come to take back ownership of the vineyard, and the king inviting people to the wedding banquet. In all of these Jesus is fairly pointedly having a dig at those who think they are holier than others. Where the outwardly good child who is initially compliant ends up ignoring his father's order. The trusted vineyard tenants kill even the owner's son. The original important guests invited to the king's banquet refuse the invitation. Jesus directs all of these parables towards his own institutionally religious elite, obliquely labelling those who consider themselves the pure guardians of God's chosen people as less worthy than those who are actually doing God's will and building God's Kingdom. So when the penny, or the denarius, finally drops, the Pharisees realise that they're the ones being got at. In public! Was Jesus just being naughty?

We all think we know this story, don't we...the nasty oily Pharisees buttering up Jesus and then springing the question, trying to trick him into saying something seditious so that they can pack him off to the Roman authorities and get rid of him. And Jesus being typically evasive in giving them an answer that shuts them up. But do we stay on the surface, taking the words literally at face value; or is there quite a lot more to be picked out of this bit of Scripture, a lot more that Jesus is asking us to find out for ourselves and leading us into discovering?

The Pharisees, who in all probability were trying very hard to obey the Law as they saw it, generally get a bad press in the Gospels and in public folklore as the scrupulous, nitpicking ones who only observe the letter of the Law and ignore the

spirit; and in the process try to bring Jesus into disrepute or worse. They don't quite understand Jesus' insistence on the Law being there to help people relate better to God and each other - not to be observed just for the sake of it. Was this yet another attempt to trap Jesus into teaching people to disobey the Romans? Or were the Pharisees genuinely asking Jesus what was the right thing to do in a very difficult situation. You might even ask whether the Pharisees and Jesus were being honest with each other in this exchange. After all, Jesus asks a Pharisee to show him the coin, but even handling money with an idolatrous image was probably considered a bit iffy to a Pharisee, risking ritual impurity. And as we've frequently seen, although Jesus was a conventionally orthodox, observant Jew, his ideas about ritual impurity were often at odds with the letter-of-the-law Pharisees.

Jesus cleverly doesn't define what is the emperor's and what is God's. Neither does he make any value judgements about either of them, saying one is better than the other. We, the readers and listeners, have to work that out for ourselves. What are "the things of the emperor?" Is it just taxes - or is it taxes plus worship of the emperor as a god - or are "the things of the emperor" a metaphor for the things of the world? Just paying taxes is proper and necessary - but the emperor isn't God, nor are the things of the world aren't always the right things to aim for. And are "the things that are God's" only going to church, giving alms, saying your prayers, convincing yourself that you're a good religious person - or are "the things that are God's" actually the things of the Kingdom of Heaven - the two great foundational commandments to love God with all your heart and mind and being and love your neighbour as yourself. Going to church and developing a relationship with God is admirable and a good focus for everyone. But if in the process we ignore the needs of our neighbours and bypass really loving them as ourselves then the Kingdom of Heaven is no nearer.

In doing that working out, where do we start? What do we think are the things of the emperor (the world) and what are God's? What's the direction we turn to in order to find our happiness? Do we actually manage to get our priorities right? The things of the emperor may well be following what the world says is the best thing to do and the right way to go. Which says we have to make enough money to be secure and get the things which society says we supposedly need, we have to have the "right" job and wear the "right" clothes and send our children to the "right" schools so that we can gain the rewards of the world: apparent success, happiness, security, status, importance. And let's face it, it's nice to have enough money not to worry about how you're going to pay the next gas bill or council tax; or have the means to feed your family good nutritious food to keep everyone healthy. Like most people, I like to be surrounded by beautiful things and comfort. The difficulty is when the question becomes "what is enough"? What I might think is enough is probably not what others think. And consider: does the notion of things of the emperor include buying clothes made by exploited people in other parts of the world, or

trendy biofuel made from cash crops grown by farmers who can't then grow enough to feed themselves - because they're supplying the world's greed for cheap energy?

Often the things of the emperor are in direct conflict with the things of God. Jesus here doesn't actually say "you have to pay your taxes." But Jesus has plenty to say about the directions taken by humanity in the choices we make. Jesus shows us in his teaching and by the example of his life that the things of God probably won't make money, may not bring worldly success or instant gratification, risk attracting persecution and hatred. What he says about all of this is found throughout the Gospels. Ultimately the things of God may be giving your life to show how to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul. So the challenge is, then, to ask not just "what would Jesus do" because we aren't in his era and the world has changed beyond all recognition to a 1st century Middle Eastern society. The challenge is more "what would Jesus say about what we're doing." What are the things we value, the lifestyle we pursue - and are they things of the emperor or are they things of God?

One real issue here is not that we have to make an "either - or" choice between the emperor and God; or between the things of the world and the things of the Kingdom. We actually need both to inform and feed each other even if they appear to conflict. Just as a coin has two inseparable sides to make it complete, so our own lives need to be whole and, actually, many sided. We need to be able to develop attitudes and practices which encourage us to integrate both the world and the Kingdom in a proper relationship. Without the monetary rewards which come from honest work, for example, we can't contribute financially towards supporting others in need. If government is the "things of Caesar" then we have the obligation to vote into government leaders who don't just say what they think we want to hear in order to get votes, but decision makers who will try to encourage the creation of a society based on Kingdom values, which in fact aren't unique to Christianity. If the Church is the "things of God" then we must make sure that the Church and its members...us... proclaim and practice not a hypocritical lip service to what we think will look good in the eyes of the world, but instead demonstrate what Jesus was really teaching: that God is a forgiving, reconciling, loving, and above all inclusive God who shows no partiality, a God who is reflected in Jesus himself who shows no partiality. Both Church and State, Caesar and God, then complement each other in working together to build the Kingdom.

No, Jesus doesn't define what is the emperor's and what is God's. We can turn the coin around and around to look at both sides, each side part of the whole. Jesus points us in the direction he wants us to go but it's our choice what we do about it. Perhaps we need to tune our spiritual SatNavs to the destination "help us to find out", praying that we will discover what we should be giving to both the emperor and God. We might even be amazed!

