

Sermon for Pentecost 19 – Sunday 19th October 2014, given by the Revd. Sarah Shaw

‘Give to God what is God’s’

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and 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 to the emperor, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Gospel reading today comes at a point of high drama in Matthew’s Gospel, immediately after Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey – making the powerful statement that **he is** Israel’s King,

- He has driven out all who were buying and selling in the temple;
- Overturned the tables of the money changers;
- Denounced all those involved in such activities;
- And he has cured the blind and the lame.

And the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, are asking him ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’. Jesus has told parables, ones that make it clear that some will enter the Kingdom and others will not – those others being the ones who believe they are most worthy of the Kingdom! Most shockingly, he has said to the chief priests and the Pharisees, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom ahead of *you*’.

No wonder, therefore, that the Pharisees, and the Sadducees plot to entrap Jesus by his own words! They must have been furious with him! And it is in this context that they ask him a series of questions with the aim of trapping him – to begin with, by asking him whether it is lawful to pay the poll tax to Caesar. This tax was particularly humiliating to the Jews as they were required to pay it as an occupied people. Of course it was lawful to *pay* the tax in the sense that they were required to pay it, but the question was whether Jesus would say it was lawful for Jews to pay it, according to their faith. The coin used for the tax, the denarius,

depicted the head of the Emperor, and the title, 'Son of a God,' so in terms of Jewish law, this coin was blasphemous. Many people objected to paying the tax on these grounds.

The trap laid for Jesus was that, if he said that it was acceptable to pay the tax, he would lose popularity with the people. On the other hand, if he said it was *not* acceptable, the religious authorities who tolerated Roman rule would report him to the civil authorities. Jesus' answer, therefore, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's' left them speechless. The actual Greek word used here for 'give' is close to 'give back' or 'render' – so Jesus was saying that this was not a gift to Caesar, but an obligation. There was an obligation to the occupying power – but Jesus reserved the greater obligation to God. Likewise, for us. Our greater obligation to God also includes our obligation to the powers who God permits to rule us.

I want to say two things about that. Firstly, this teaching of Jesus makes it clear that God is sovereign. Earthly powers rule us only in the context of God's greater rule. In the Isaiah reading, we heard the promises of God to Cyrus the Great, the Persian King who ruled the Jews and is credited with having encouraged the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. God promised Cyrus, 'For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, though you do not know me'. This prophecy about Cyrus meant that God, Israel's God, had a purpose for a king of another nation who worshipped other gods, who did not know Israel's God. And radically, this particular King would be used by God for the deliverance of his chosen people! Israel's God alone allowed Kings to rule and would use them for *his* purposes. The God Israel worshipped and we worship was, and is, the sovereign God of all nations and all kings.

In the midst of all that we hear in the news now, about the hate and violence wrought by Islamic State, for example – probably the most horrendous current example of power abused and bent on terror – we can feel powerless to change anything. God, however, is not powerless, but is still sovereign – even over powers who do not recognise him, as Cyrus didn't. God does, and will, act sometimes in the most unlikely situations and through unlikely people. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we know that the worst manifestations of violence, and death, do not have the last word. They are already defeated.

So we can be reassured that God is sovereign, that he is in control, that earthly powers are temporary. We can be reassured - but we cannot be complacent. This is my second point. We are called on by Jesus to 'give to God what is God's'. We are made in his image, and we are called, therefore, to be 'Kingdom-bringers' – people who are concerned with, and work for, the things that the Bible tells us matter to God – justice, mercy, righteousness, forgiveness, peace. We may have obligations to systems and powers we don't agree with,

but God also desires us to be his partners in bringing about change. In our Collect today, we prayed 'Give us grace to obey where we are called to solidarity, and courage to resist when your justice is at stake.' When the values of the Kingdom – justice, mercy, righteousness, forgiveness, peace, are threatened, as they are continually, we are called upon, meanwhile, to live, work and pray for those things. The desire expressed in the words of the Lord's Prayer 'Your Kingdom come' is real. Our greater obligation is to God, and the coming of his Kingdom. In the face of so much need and distress in our world, what is our part to play?

Prayer is a good place to start. Maurice and I have been talking this week about the purpose of prayer, and what it does. Does it make sense to say that God needs our prayers? Perhaps it is not so much that God *needs* our prayers, but that he desires them, he invites our participation in his Kingdom. There are many answers to the question 'What is the purpose of prayer?' but my experience and that of others is that it makes a difference, and that it is a good thing. Jesus himself modelled the need for us to pray for specific things when he taught his disciples to pray 'Our Father'...

Giving to God the things that are God's also means, I believe, rendering or giving back to God the gifts, talents, opportunities, he gives us, to further his Kingdom. It means prayerfully discerning how we use those gifts, and our resources – our time, our money – to line up our priorities with God's priorities.

As we come together to the Lord's Table, let us pray that as well as the offerings we bring, God will take all that we give back to him – our talents, our resources – and use them in the service of his Kingdom. Amen.