

Render to Caesar what is Caesar's...

... Self-deception is too easy.

A sermon given on the Nineteenth Sunday of Trinity, 18th October 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Minster.

Matthew 22:15-22.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's" - so runs the famous punch line of this morning's reading. But Jesus's words are often misapplied and used to support arguments that are not backed up by the rest of scripture. So let's begin this morning by saying what Jesus doesn't mean.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God, the things that are God's" is not an argument for keeping politics and religion completely separate, although that's what it might at first sight sound like. I can say that quite confidently because it would never have occurred to any 1st century Jew or Christian that religion and politics were different things. They were both mixed up together. The centre of the Jewish nation's political life, where issues were discussed and deals made was the temple. The God of the Jews was the Lord of all creation who made the world and everything in it, including its kings and politicians and lawmakers and armies. The King of Israel, the Messiah, was the Lord's anointed representative on Earth and there was no area of life in which this God is not interested. The bulk of the Old Testament is made up of histories showing how God shaped the life of Israel as a nation; of political issues, whenever a law or policy seems to be at variance with the values of the kingdom of God - and it seems, for example, to be targeted against some of the most vulnerable people, such as the hostile environment policy on immigration; or whenever a government seems to be promoting the interests of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of those on the margins, such as the law on aggravated trespass; or whenever people with power use their position to promote their own self-interest, as seems to be the case at the moment with a number of COVID-19-related contracts which have been awarded to companies run by friends of cabinet ministers or government advisers without there being any public tendering process.

.... Then to remain silent is to collude with the abuse.

And the Bible has stern things to say about religious people who observe all the right festivals and make all the right sacrifices, yet who fail to feed the hungry or to pay their workers a fair wage. So it should actually be normal to hear political issues discussed from

the pulpit and critiqued from the perspective of the Gospel. God does not turn a blind eye to goings-on in Whitehall and Downing Street. So if Jesus isn't saying that the church and state should be kept apart, what does he mean when he says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's?"

I think he's warning us against the opposite problem to the one I've just outlined, which is to claim God's backing for an all too-human ambition or ideology. Many of us will have had conversations at one time or another with earnest Christians who say things like, 'The Lord has told me that we should do such and such.' And it's very difficult to argue with someone like that without at best seeming to lack faith and at worst sounding as though you're opposing God. And there are many churches where power games are played out under the mantle of 'The Lord has told me this is what we should do.' How much worse when a king or political movement claims the authority of God: opposing the leader can then not only be treason, it can also be blasphemy. And what is going on in the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees and the Herodians is that they are trying to get Jesus to identify God with a particular political position, with a pro- or anti-nationalist standpoint.

They ask him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" And if he says it is lawful, he's legitimising the enemy oppressor; the foreign empire that has conquered and is oppressing his people. And that won't be very popular with the people. If, on the other hand, he says it is unlawful to pay taxes, then he's questioning the legitimacy of the imperial rulers and could be accused of inciting rebellion, even though it might be quite popular in the eyes of the people. And these pious religious people are asking Jesus, 'What God's position on this? What's the proper theological line?' And Jesus calls their bluff and exposes their hypocrisy in a very subtle way: "Show me the coin used for the tax," he says, and they duly produce a Roman denarius.

And the thing to appreciate here is that in first-century Judea, there were two currencies in circulation. The Jewish people didn't like using Roman currency because it was idolatrous: it bore the image of the emperor on it and so therefore broke the second commandment against graven images. And it also had an inscription around the edge declaring the emperor to be a son of God. So it was doubly blasphemous. So for all everyday transactions, the Jewish people avoided the Roman currency and used their own. But they had to use the Roman coins to pay their taxes because the Romans wouldn't accept anything else. So when Jesus answers this question about whether or not it's right to pay taxes to Rome by asking them to show him a Roman coin, they produce one. And you can

feel their embarrassment, as he says, 'Oh, yes. And whose head is this? Oh, and what does this inscription say?'

You see, they've been insincerely pretending not to know whether or not it's right to pay taxes to Rome, when all along they were carrying Roman coins, coins they wouldn't have had unless they had taken the trouble of changing them from the everyday Jewish currency with the intention of paying their taxes. The presence of these Roman coins showed that these people had already answered their own question. They were intending to pay their taxes to Caesar, but they were still pretending to put God's will first and to have no king but God. So when Jesus says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's", he's telling them to be more honest. That's why he accuses them of hypocrisy: they're not being sincere; they're pretending to be full on for God when actually they've compromised and opted for a quiet life where they won't get into trouble with the Romans.

So I think what this passage exposes is our human capacity for self-deception. The Pharisees and the Herodians thought of themselves as godly, upright people, and they might have believed that even as they paid their taxes to Caesar. So Jesus is saying to us, 'Check your motives; pray that the spirit of truth will shine in your hearts and help you to be honest with yourself; be careful about claiming God's backing for those ambitions and goals we hold dear, but which may have nothing to do with God.'

Merging our own agenda with that of God is one of the commonest failings of religious people. But God's agenda will always be bigger than ours, more radical, less comfortable. Mature Christians will be aware that there will always be a gap between what I want and what God wants: doing God's will usually involves taking a risk, stepping out of our comfort zone and going against the grain of our own immediate desires in response to a deeper calling.

"Give to the emperor, what is the emperor's and to God, what is God's"

It's actually OK to have your own purposes, your own aims and ambitions = there's nothing inherently wrong with that. But don't confuse them with God's, because his purposes will stretch and reshape ours in ways we will always find hard to imagine.

Reading Text

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹ 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." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.