

Christ's Freedom and Liberation...

... goes beyond politics

A sermon given on the Twentieth Sunday of Trinity, 22nd October 2023 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 22:15-22

In today's Gospel, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees and the Herodians. They ask him, "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" Jesus replies, "*Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*"

At first glance, this story seems to say that the service of God should be divorced entirely from the political; that service of God has nothing to do with rich and poor; nothing to do with class struggle; nothing to do with politics at all. It appears Jesus is putting forward a vision of two kinds of service: the public life, the things that belong to Caesar, the secular, the economic, the political; and on the other hand, the private life, the things that have to do with God, such as prayer and worship. He seems to be saying that when it comes to political action, we can leave God out of it. In the same way, he seems to be saying that when it comes to the service of God, we can leave politics and economics out of it.

And I'm sure there are some Christians who would be happy with this arrangement: Christians for whom their worship of God is a private matter; who don't interfere with anyone else and don't want to be interfered with themselves; just to be left alone to worship God.

In the same way, there are many politicians who would be very happy to be left alone to get on with the business of government. These politicians don't want to interfere with religion, and in return, they don't want the Church to interfere with them. We can see many recent examples of MPs telling bishops to stay in their lane to stick to religion. One MP recently told bishops that they risk becoming politicians that wear mitres and that taking political positions is damaging to the Church; or another who recently told the Tory Party conference that the Church should stop interfering with politics. And you can understand such politicians' point of view - mixing God with politics can be extremely dangerous - God is an unpredictable, explosive substance. Surely the best thing to do with God is to insulate Him carefully inside churches - or better still, inside small groups of like-minded, devout people.

Is this what Jesus means in today's Gospel? Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's - be secular on weekdays and leave religion for the weekend?

In today's Gospel, it is the Herodians and the Pharisees who confront Jesus. The Herodians supported the occupying Romans and were collaborators with the colonial regime, while the Pharisees were deeply nationalistic and believed strongly in the independence of Judea - for them the Roman occupation was akin to blasphemy and thus Caesar was deserving of nothing. Despite the Herodians and Pharisees' mutual hatred for each other, they are willing to work together against a common enemy - Jesus. This is because the Herodians recognise that Jesus' teachings are subversive to the political order, whilst the Pharisees recognise that Jesus' teachings are subversive to the political order, but more importantly, to the religious order. The Pharisees are hoping Jesus will either condemn Rome, meaning the Herodians present can take this news back to the Roman authorities, or that he will declare his vague support for Rome and lose popular support altogether. This is not to say that Jesus is unprepared to lose popular support - when he is crucified, he is deserted by almost everyone except his mother and is at the hands of the Romans, betrayed by the nationalists. But he is not prepared to lose popular support on the current terms.

With all this in mind, we misunderstand Jesus if we think his reply is simply opting for the Herodian position that the gospel and politics are entirely separate and should not be mixed. *"Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's"* - here, Jesus rejects the premise of the question altogether. The fighting between the Herodians and the Pharisees, between collaborationists and nationalists, is not the ultimate struggle - they are merely pawns in a larger struggle they cannot understand.

The freedom and liberation Jesus brings goes beyond political liberation. Jesus stood against the Pharisees not because he was a Herodian collaborator with the Romans, but because the Pharisees were fighting the wrong fight. They were fighting against the forces and idols of paganism in the name of a God they had appropriated to their own selfish and nationalistic ends. The Pharisees vision of God and liberation is too narrow - the true fight is taking place on a cosmic scale between the powers of sin and death on the one hand, and the powers of life, spirit and liberation on the other, that is to say, God's kingdom.

The Roman collaborators and the Pharisees thought they were fighting each other, but they were really just pawns of the powers of sin and death, powers they couldn't begin to understand. The Church eagerly awaits the ultimate final coming of God's kingdom, but also works to bring about the kingdom here and now. And the kingdom is brought about here and now through mutual love and service of one another. And this is done in all spheres of life, but most certainly the realm of the political - liberating people from poverty, suffering, oppression are all highly political acts. And even liberating people from the powers of sin and death, sharing

the good news and helping them to turn to Christ can certainly be a political act in certain contexts.

The kingdom of which Jesus speaks is not achieved just by defeating Roman domination or by replacing it with political nationalism or the authority of the Church. The kingdom is achieved in part when we love our enemy and serve our neighbour, and will be fully achieved only when Jesus will hand over the kingdom to God the Father, having done away with every sovereignty, authority and power, so that God may finally be All in All.

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.