

Sermon Evensong Ordinary Sunday 23 Year B 2021

The Epistle reading tonight from the first letter of Saint Peter we might rightly classify as among ‘the hard sayings of Scripture.’ And we get a ‘double whammy’ in the reading tonight! We get the prickly subject of ‘slaves accept the authority of your masters’, which will take more than we are able tonight to unpick. And we hear ‘accept the authority of every human institution... fear God. Honour the emperor.’ At present, our relationship to the ruling authorities is perhaps more pertinent, and felt more closely, than most have ever felt.

The ‘big picture’ that the apostle Peter brings to this text is that our world is *divinely ordered*. The apostle holds to a view that there is a good order, established by God, and human flourishing occurs when we submit to that good order. And this good order is *sustained* by God. God remains in charge and in control. Peter has a very clear idea that we are not stumbling through the dark, trying to make the most of the mess and chaos of life, with the strongest man at the top, and the rest of us scrambling to carve out and secure a place. No. There is a firm idea here that what happens in the ordering of our lives happens at God’s word and by his will. And Peter makes it quite clear that alongside this is a concern to be a good example. By lawful obedience Christians can give positive witness, that we need not draw undue attention to ourselves, and that Christians are not nearly as strange as some people make us out to be.

Now, the Bible frequently argues for the basic goodness of government. Israel became a nation. When in exile, Jeremiah said, “*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.*” Paul argues, “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*” There is a way to live a distinctly faithful life in relation to government. Jesus said so. Jeremiah said so. Paul said so. And here Peter says so too. And we might think, as plenty do, that that pretty much sums it up. What the ruling authorities say, we as people of faith should just accept.

But here we come up hard against a very fine example of the need to hold the *entire* scriptural record in conversation. Because the apparently simple instruction, ‘submit to the authorities’ must also be held against *other* voices in the biblical witness, not least, Peter in the Acts of the Apostles saying, *we serve God rather than man*. Now, this is not a case so favored of those who seek to dismiss the bible, who argue that, *It says one thing here and another thing there. How can you possibly trust something*

which so blatantly contradicts itself? But in fact, this goes to highlight *the credibility* of the biblical witness! It doesn't always iron out the difficulties. It does not seek to present us with a one-dimensional, flattened out view. The different voices need to be brought into conversation with each other, even while we discern the guiding principles.

In the example placed before us tonight we come back to the idea that lies behind Peter's argument: that there is a good order, divinely instituted. When the authorities or institutions – and 'human institution' here is a broad category, likely to refer to the common social institutions of an ordered society such as the state, but also the household, social groups and the family – when these violate or contradict the divine order, they are rightly challenged. The thing about order is that it implies limits and parameters. In other words, we are not free to do as we wish within our given order. It must submit to the *divine order*. Yes, within our families. Yes, within other social groupings in society. And most certainly in the ordering of the state. The state cannot, indeed must not be obeyed or submitted to when it contravenes God's law.

This is spelt out most clearly in an account preserved in all three synoptic gospels: *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's*. The point being, yes, there are some things the ruling authorities can rightly claim from us, but others which they cannot. God must have his due. In other words, there is *a limit* to what can be claimed.

In our own time, in our context, we come very close indeed to limit of what Caesar may claim, the limit to what may be given. This past year and half we have accepted – in fact *submitted*, (to use the words of Scripture) – to the demands which have severely impacted the free exercise of our faith (and every other aspect of our life as we know only too well). The implementation of proposed vaccine passports – already in place in some jurisdictions in some places around the world - will certainly exceed that limit. To say that our ability to gather for worship – which is the duty of every sincere Christian – is dependent on our medical status crosses the line, and must be resisted by every believer and fair minded person. To require vaccine passports to participate in the life of the church is to suggest that physical health is the highest good. As secular institutions promote health at any cost, churches must be especially careful to resist the temptations of 'healthism' as a pseudo-religion. Deference to civil authority is not unlimited. Scriptures tells us, a fitting, properly-ordered concern for our material well-being can easily become disordered, as can our deference to the authorities. Amen.