

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 29 Year A 2020

In a way few of us have in our lifetimes, we now experience the intrusion and control of the state over areas that until now had been kept off limits. We are told what to wear (a mask), how to clean ourselves (wash your hands and for good measure sanitise), who we can visit (only those in our 'social bubble'), how many people we can meet (only a handful) and where can travel to (no further than 5 kilometres). Now, mostly, we have accepted these intrusions. This is what the state has told us to do to keep ourselves and others physically safe. And mostly we have accepted that this curtailing of our freedoms and usual way of life must be endured for this season and time. Some, of course, push against these, which we must indeed hope for on any issue of public policy. If not - if alternative voices are not heard - then we are heading toward something more troubling indeed. But mostly we have acquiesced to the demands made of us in a way that would have been unimaginable a year ago.

Our Lord's response to a question put to him by a party of challengers would rarely be so pertinent as it is now. *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things of God.* Perhaps we feel this issue more keenly than usual because the things we would usually render unto God – or at least the public and communal aspects of them – have been taken from us by Caesar...

Following the set of parables we've heard for the last few weeks, the gospel now turns to a set of four conflict stories in which leaders of different factions within Judaism struggle with Jesus. In each story they seek to set Jesus a trap, a trap each time he manages to escape. We have also been hearing a fair bit of late of the Gospel writer Matthew instructing his community on how to negotiate its relationship with Israel, and of it forging an identity separate from Israel. Now, he briefly turns his mind to a related question: what is our relationship with the civic authorities? How do we navigate our way through competing claims on our loyalties? How do *we* navigate the tension between the demands of faith and the demands of the state, or of civic authorities?

We feel this so keenly at present because, again, for the first time in the lifetimes of most of us, what the state has imposed on us has had a direct and sustained impact on our life of faith. Importantly, the gospel today reminds us that the church does not exist as an isolated, remote entity. There is a world around us we must engage with, come to terms with and find our home in. The gospel today points us quite firmly towards engagement, but a *properly ordered* engagement. And this right ordering of our engagement is dependent only if we know what is at stake. And in typical gospel understatement, the stakes are quite high.

The Pharisees who join here with the Herodians do so in an unusual united front against Jesus. The Pharisees smarted under Roman taxes. For them, the tax was symbolically loaded with everything that was wrong with being an occupied people. In first-century Judah it was a highly contested issue. The poll tax first levied in 6AD sparked many Jewish-Roman clashes. So, by the time of Jesus, and certainly by the time the gospel was written, the resentment and the history of confrontation had been in play several decades. But the Herodians, on the other hand, supported the Rome-endorsed Herod dynasty and therefore the tax. So, the delegation represents both yes and no on the tax issue. Jesus will surely displease someone with his answer.

The question at the heart of it all, *is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not*, we are told was asked with *malice*. The same word can be translated as *evil*, as in *deliver us from evil* as we know so well from the Lord's Prayer. Jesus' response, *why do you put me to the test*, echoes once more the Our Father, *lead us not into temptation/the time of test*. But more strikingly, we should hear the echo from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, where the devil tests Jesus. So, in both 'evil' (or malice) and 'tempt' it is clear that this encounter is more than a game of wits or a mental trap. If Jesus is being *tempted* here, then the evil one is, through these questioners, is seeking to lure Jesus into a political power struggle. It is the exact same issue, you would remember, that Jesus must contend with in the wilderness. *I will give you all the kingdoms of the world*. In other words, Jesus understands that he is being confronted by *evil*, not just a 'tough question'. *These* are the high stakes at play.

On one level, yes, we can cheerfully conclude that Jesus is of sharp mind and once more is able to outwit his opponents. On another level, however, we can see that the evil is real. It can approach through flattery: *Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no man...* The agents of evil may come from unlikely places, even religious leaders. We must then, as believers who must do battle with these same temptations, have our wits about us. We must be guarded against any crumbs of flattery that are thrown our way. And the issues most often are complex, demanding discernment.

Jesus' response to the question did not and does not solve the problem. It simply defines the nature of the struggle. What to render and to whom remains a struggle. And we find the New Testament writers in various ways seeking to wrestle with this question, with various responses offered. Saint Paul in Romans, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.* In Titus, *Be subject to rulers and authorities... be obedient.* In First Peter, *accept the authority of every human institution.* But in Revelation, empire is depicted as the dragon, the terrible beast, uttering haughty and blasphemous words, making war on the saints.

It was not an easy dynamic for the early church to work through. It is not an easy dynamic for us to work through. If we can, at times support the state and at other times resist the state, then the answers will never be simple. And in fact, they are never final. The struggle continues with every new situation. Jesus was not exempt from this struggle. In his obedience to God, he resolves this question for himself by standing alone with both the state and religious institutions conspiring against him. In our context, the question is not likely to be, *did we give enough to Caesar?* In all truth we must ask, *has too much been given?* Instead, we should hold before us the question posed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *if we were tried for being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?* We might not have the usual public and communal props about us at this time. But the obligations of faith are no less, even if that is surely the temptation of our time. The demands of Caesar may press hard against us. But let this time not be for us an excuse to give God less than he is due. Amen.