

Trinity XX – 29th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year A

I am certain all of us have been impacted in one way or the other with the latest conflict in the middle east. The unprovoked attack on innocent Israeli civilians by the terror group Hamas left the world in a state of shock. While Israel has a right to defend itself, I am deeply concerned of the loss of innocent civilian lives in Gaza and the developing humanitarian crisis over there.

I am no stranger to war, as I grew up in Sri Lanka with a civil war in the country. The terrorist group called the Tamil Tigers carried out a civil war over 30 years, killing innocent civilians with suicide bombs in public places. After decades of conflict the government troops moved to wipe out the terrorists. The government forces did destroy the terrorists but it came at a cost of thousands of innocent civilian lives. As, Christians we are to speak for the innocent no matter what creed, colour or race they belong to. We are to condemn what is unjust and unfair no matter who carries it out. And, most importantly, we are to pray for peace in Israel and Gaza. While the middle eastern conflict it is a highly complicated issue going back to hundreds of years, we are to hope and pray for a permanent end to violence and conflict in this part of our world.

Jesus too lived in a politically complicated world. The Roman occupation of the Holy Land was hated by most of the Jews. Jews were required to pay an

annual poll tax of one denarius (a day's wage) to the Roman overlords from the age of puberty to the age of 65, and were also required to pay a half-shekel (a standard silver coin) tax towards the running of the Temple. With the increase of Jesus' popularity two opposing groups of his time (the pharisees and the Herodians) wanted to trap him saying something politically and religiously incorrect. While the pharisees opposed the Roman taxes for religious reasons, the Herodians were collaborators of the king Herod and of Rome, so they favoured the tax. These two groups were unnatural associates. If, as Shakespeare noted, 'Misery acquaints a man with strange bed-fellows', the same could be said of hatred. The pharisees and the Herodians are united in their common desire to eliminate Jesus, and they come up with a tricky question "Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not? If Jesus had answered 'yes', he could have been accused of betraying his religious duty by the Pharisees and portrayed as someone who does not care about the poor who are oppressed by taxes from both the Empire and the Temple. However, if he had answered 'no', he could have been reported to the Roman authorities for inciting others not to pay their taxes. This was a trick indeed.

Jesus' majestic response not only frees him from the dilemma but actually goes on the offensive against his adversaries. By calling for them to produce a

coin with Caesar's image on it, he shows them up as people who carry around the offensive coinage, something he does not himself do. In this sense, they are revealed as already collaborating whereas his own position is not disclosed.

Then his dual 'Render' instruction throws back the dilemma on them. They had set the issue simply in terms of obligation to Rome; they had not brought God into the equation at all-though they would claim to be religious authorities. Jesus takes possession of the religious and moral high ground by setting responsibility to the civil power (which he does not deny) within the broader and higher framework of obedience to God.

It is difficult to derive from Jesus' response any clear indication of his attitude to the Roman military occupation. Certainly, he distanced himself from the kind of Zealot fundamentalism that required absolute theocracy in the name of God – a religious attitude all too resurgent in our world today. His followers, especially as portrayed by Luke (Gospel and Acts), would commend a peaceful and loyal existence within the Roman Empire so long as allegiance to Christ Jesus and the Rule of God had priority (Acts 5:29). The later Christian sense of the separation of Church and State has its origins here, along with the recognition that believers have responsibilities in both realms that oblige in conscience before God.

Furthermore, Jesus does not specify the things that belong to Caesar, for Caesar does not possess anything independently of God; he does not need to specify the things that belong to God, since everything does. Even Caesar belongs to God! Jesus is hardly arguing to two independent spheres of power and obligation, that of Caesar and that of God, with parallel sets of obligations. Since God has dominion over the whole of Creation, Caesar's relative power is subservient to the ultimate power of God. As we heard in our first reading the Persian Ruler Cyrus is portrayed as God's chosen instrument for the liberation of Israel from exile in Babylon. All authority and power have to be evaluated in the light of God's plan.

The Lord is speaking about our religion and our politics. We should not separate our religion and our politics because we have obligations to Caesar and obligations to God. They are not separate watertight compartments. Jesus is saying to us, 'Let Caesar be Caesar, but let God be God', we give Caesar our taxes, a good citizen's loyalty, and our judgement, but our conscience, our soul, our choices in life belong to God. At the end of our lives, we will be responsible for what we have done as individuals and citizens, not to Caesar, but to God.

As, we pray for peace, let us renew our work to build the values of the Kingdom of God in our troubled world. The values of justice, compassion, honesty and love. "Jesus reminds each of us in the beatitudes - Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God"