

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 29 Year A 2017

Part of being human it seems, is to learn how to balance the competing claims made on our lives. We have to learn to set priorities, to work out what is important and what needs to be put aside. We must learn to walk the tightrope between the demands of work and family, between work and leisure. We hear much these days of work/life balance. We hear a lot about because so many people don't manage it! Christmas is coming and that seems to be the season of competing demands!! About now people will start planning how to keep all parts of the family happy. Plans will be made for the family BBQ the week before Christmas for all the family we don't actually want to spend Christmas day with. Then Christmas breakfast here, lunch there, Christmas tea somewhere else and Boxing Day somewhere else again. How did it get to be like this?! We live with the tension of having so many voices tell us what their demands and expectations are. There is a real struggle to balance it all.

We have been hearing a fair bit of late of the Gospel writer Matthew instructing his community how to negotiate and make sense of its relationship with Israel, 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? Following the little set of parables we've heard the last few weeks, the gospel now turns to a set of four conflict stories in which leaders of different parties (or factions) in Judaism struggle with Jesus. In each story they seek to set Jesus a trap, a trap each time he manages to escape.

The controversial issue we hear today sees the Pharisees and Herodians trying to get Jesus to make judgement on is the issue of taxation. The tax was highly unpopular of course – something imposed by the Roman imperial forces. In the background of course competing claims of divinity – Christ, the son of God, and the self-styled Divine Caesars. So, the stakes are high! Now, if Jesus says he's for the tax he will lose the support of the people. If he says he's against it he sets himself up as a rebel against Rome and so a threat to their tenuous peace and order. But, as I said, Jesus doesn't fall for the trap. Instead he gets his accusers to produce a coin.

And in this he shows *them* up – *they're* the ones carrying around the offensive coin with an idolatrous image of Caesar's head. They show themselves then to already be in collaboration with their supposed enemies. But in saying *render to Caesar the things of Caser and to God the things of God* Jesus goes beyond the terms of the challenge put to him. Their terms of reference was simply of responsibility to the civic power. Jesus, though, opens that up the broader framework of obedience to God.

It's a good framework for us too! How do *we* navigate the tension between the demands of faith and the demands of the state, or of civic authorities? The gospel we encounter today helpfully reminds us the church is not to exist as an isolated, remote entity. The gospel here points us quite firmly towards engagement - but a *properly ordered* engagement. We would know of some branches of the Christian family who imagine themselves above and beyond everyone else; who seek not to be contaminated by the big, bad world out there; who despise the world. This is a real tragedy because it misses the

nuances, the subtleties of the gospel portion today. And that attitude forgets the original intent of creation in which God describes all he has made as being 'good', and his creation of human kind as 'very good'. The mission of the church, we need to remember, is to bring back, to draw back, creation to this original goodness. The world isn't the enemy. It simply needs to be properly ordered. We accept and welcome and use those things which are helpful, good and holy, wherever they are found. We challenge, confront and change those which are not helpful, good or holy.

Now, we are not told in the gospel today *how* to negotiate the different and at time opposing claims that can be made on our lives. There is not a prescriptive list on how it's all going to work. Because it will be different for each age and each context. The demands made on first century Judeans is different to the demands made on twenty-first century Australians. So, we should always be a little cautious of those who insist that there is one right way for all time and all people in living out the tension. It's tricky work and each generation must open itself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discern its course.

It doesn't mean we have to invent or come up with something new - a new gospel if you like - for each age and place. No. There is one, timeless Gospel. And there are a few givens as we steer our way: the Scriptures, the creeds, the sacraments, the body of teachings that has come down to us through the ages - we carry all these with us as we come discern which voice we listen to and how to juggle the competing claims made on our lives and loyalties. But the simple premise put to us in the gospel today is a mighty starting point: that all our decisions - all that we struggle with and try to make sense of - must be made against *the broader and higher reference to God*.

In the two significant, as yet unresolved issues facing the Australian public today - same-sex marriage and euthanasia - we very clearly see the competing claims of God and Caesar. What I said a few weeks ago regarding same-sex marriage can also be said of euthanasia - that it is an intrusion of the state into an area it does not belong. If marriage is now simply to be understood as question of love, then it is not the business of the state to legislate on matters of the heart. It is beyond their mandate! It is not territory we should give over. And the state most certainly has no business over matters of life and death. Our public officials cannot even manage our roads or public infrastructure. Ought we trust them with who ought to love or die?! These are the things that do not belong to Caesar! They ought not be given to him.

Pope Francis warned in a visit to communist Albania of, *'the violence and tragedy that can be caused by a forced exclusion of God from personal and communal life...when in the name of ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from society, it ends up adoring idols.'* Now that we live in context where God has been all but expelled from public life, it seems we have created idols of our own making. There are legitimate claims made on us by the state which we are right to observe and obey. We are not anarchists! But as people of faith our perspective is not simply the here and now. And as people of faith we need to ensure that what properly belongs to God we do indeed give him! God invites our entire lives to be formed, shaped and directed in reference to him. We all want harmony, order and balance in our lives. But this only comes when our whole lives are ordered toward God. Amen.