

Year A Proper 29

Exodus 33: 12-23

1 Thess 1: 1-10

Matthew 22: 15-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Lord, my strength and my redeemer. **Amen**

Matthew really likes writing about Jesus in a way that tells stories in threes. And today's reading is no exception; it is the first part of three stories in chapter 22, which sets Jesus up to deliver a strong speech against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23. Next week, we get the third of the stories; for some reason our lectionary misses out the second story. You will just need to read all of chapter 22 for yourselves to really get the bigger picture.

Chapter 22 vv 15 - 22 tells a story, and it is obvious that the story is about a trap that Jesus neatly avoids. The scribes and pharisees sent their disciples to see Jesus in the Temple courtyard, and these disciples use flattering language to address Jesus and then ask him a question for which they believe there is no right answer. In v 16 they say, 'We know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth...'

It's not hard to spot when flattery has an ulterior purpose. And we know that Jesus fully understood that the compliments paid to him were a crude attempt to paint him into a corner. And in answering their question it would either lead to an accusation of sedition against the ruling powers or would lead to him losing his popular following by supporting the oppressive taxation systems of the invading Romans.

So, I want you to imagine the scene. You are sitting within the Temple complex, in a part of the Temple where only Jews were allowed to go. It is a fairly big inner courtyard, where people meet and greet each other, where people buy and sell Temple sacrifices, and on a regular basis individual teachers would hold debates and conversations with a crowd about their understanding of their faith. Many of the Jews in the Temple, and especially

those who have travelled in from some distance would be good pious folk, who take seriously the Torah and especially the ten commandments. So, here you are, chatting to friends, catching up on news, grumbling about the Romans, 'what have they ever done for us...', and you like to listen to the various teachers or Rabbis who hold forth in this courtyard. You notice a crowd has gathered around one of these teachers and you recognise him as a wandering Rabbi from Galilee, who has a reputation as a holy man and a healer. You are curious and draw closer so you can hear what the teacher has to say today. You hear one of the crowd, a disciple of a well-known Pharisee say;

'Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

You hear several people make an instinctive drawing in of breath, and realise you did the same. You think to yourself: Ouch! That's a pretty smart question, how is he going to get out of this one! If he says we shouldn't pay the taxes someone is sure to report him to the Roman authorities – the Romans are very twitchy about Galileans; the last one who objected to paying Roman taxes led a serious revolt and the Romans came down hard on them – killed the lot of them by crucifixion. But hang on, if this Rabbi says we should pay the Poll tax, a tax which cripples us financially every year when they come to collect it after the harvest, then he will lose this crowd, they will turn against him and possibly they will rough him up a bit when he gets outside. No matter how good his healing powers, he won't have anyone wanting to follow or listen to him anymore!

You lean in to hear what Jesus has to say, intrigued to know who he is going to alienate; the Roman authorities or his fellow Jews. You miss his first few words, but catch him calling the questioner a hypocrite. Oh boy, this could be quite tasty...

You distinctly hear Jesus ask the questioner and his little group to show him a coin used to pay the tax. And just as quick as you please, one of this group puts his hand in to his purse on his belt and pulls out a sparkling silver denarius.

You say to yourself, 'A whole denarius! I'd be lucky to get that amount for a weeks' work.' And then you think, hang on! Why has he got a denarius? And even if he had one, why did he dare to show it here within the Temple precincts? Doesn't he know it is against the Torah to have such a coin, let alone

dare to bring it out here? It has a portrait of the emperor on one side – and that goes directly against the second commandment, never to make an idol, and especially an image whose purpose is idolatry. (Exodus 20:4). But to my mind, worse than that, it has an inscription on it, in Latin. ‘Divi Filius’ or ‘Son of God’ – which is basically saying that the Emperor is someone we should worship, and yet I know that the first commandment states that, ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’ (Exodus 20:3).

And you hear someone near you in the crowd muttering that the coin should have been exchanged for some good Jewish brass coins – that didn’t offend God – before the man even came into the Temple. And you were certain most other people in the crowd thought exactly the same way. No-one should have brought such a coin into the Temple.

And then you hear Jesus say, ‘Give back to the emperor what is the emperor’s’. And he goes on to say, ‘give to God the things that are God’s’. You recall hearing this rabbi’s stories before, especially a parable about wicked tenants who refused to give fruit to the landowner that they owed him. Clearly this jibe at the questioner points to the fact that they may not be giving to God what they should do.

And the crowd around you murmur appreciatively, and you smile to yourself. This wandering Galilean rabbi certainly got the better of those pharisee’s disciples. He told them to return to the emperor a coin that should not have been in the Temple, and confirmed that all that we have is a gift from God and it is our duty to give back to God that which God has given us, in our honest labour, in a tenth of our produce and any surplus coins we may be able to earn and store up over the year. Jesus avoided a charge of revolt and of encouraging people not to pay their taxes, whilst saying that some taxes must be paid but it is more important to give all that is due to God.

You and your friends then spend the next hour or so, as the day cools and the sun goes down, replaying the exchange, and trying to work out how else the wandering Galilean rabbi could have managed to answer. You all admit you didn’t see his answer coming, and can find no fault with it.

Apart from showing that Jesus is smart how can we learn from this gospel story for today?

One of the key aspects of this story is the right balance between obedience to the state and obedience to religion. Throughout modern history, attempts at creating states that believe they have their policies and ethos blessed by God, have all ended in collapse or violent conflict. We know that when the balance between individual's personal responses, their community's responses and the level of institutional power and authority are out of balance, bad things happen.

Christianity needs to be free to express God's kingdom values, to engage in what Jurgen Moltmann calls 'an attack upon the world and a calling in the world', in his book, 'A Theology of Hope', written after the Second World War. He is clear that church of whatever calling, cannot fully identify the existing and current structures of society with the kingdom of God, and are called to work in that space, in the tension between civil society and the ideals of God's kingdom, which will continue to ensure public freedom.

Moltmann urges us to maintain our personal faith, to enable our free responses based on the faith we have, and to also work as a community, recognising the enriching of humanity in fellowship together, and being a place where we can effectively mediate between each other.

Moltmann respected the institutional church as a place of balance and order, where change is not too fast (that is an understatement), and where ethical authority should lie.

I have been concerned watching some of the nomination hearings this past week of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court of the USA, which seems to draw state and religion even closer together; where religion is servant to the state.

Moltmann is right to urge us to be wary of such moves. People of faith need to be prophetic voices, and work to heal and develop healthy communities. Given what has happened in politics over the last four years in the UK and the USA it would be easy to become weary and complacent, to believe our voice is diminished and not worth the effort trying to get heard. However, this gospel

reading is a wake-up call, it is making clear that the balance between state power and authority and that of individuals and especially those of faith is something we all need to be conscious of.

We do need to pay taxes to the state, but we also need to pay attention to what God's kingdom is all about and ensure we give back to God the gifts God has given to us.

Our public services are never going to meet all of society's needs and they shouldn't – big organisations offering 'one size fits all' solutions are not the best answer to many human needs. As Christians we need to be giving back to God by helping, supporting, encouraging and empowering members of our community to act and care for our neighbours. Our neighbours are individuals. We need to meet them where they are and support them with the gifts God has given us. Where our community is not best placed to help the needs, then that is where the state needs to provide.

This teaching of Jesus' uses money to get a point across. But the teaching is about giving back to God what God has given us. And just now, during this time of pandemic, I believe it is important for us all to consider what we can do to contribute to our communities. What gifts have you been given by God that you can offer to lift others into a life of light and wellbeing as the clocks change and the long dark nights return?