

Year A, Proper 24, 22 October 2023

Isaiah 45.1-7; Psalm 96.1-9; Thessalonians 1.1-10; Matthew 22.1-15-22

The conflict between Israel and militant Palestinians is set to escalate in a manner that causes great anxiety since the attack of Hamas on Israel and Israelis two weeks ago. A week or so earlier 100,000 Armenians left their homelands in fear of further suppressions by the state of Azerbaijan. The war in Ukraine begun on 24 February 2022 continues. Earlier in the year we saw military regimes take control of a number of Sahel nation states. The world is not a happy place. Against this backdrop we are asked to consider Jesus' enigmatic answer to the Pharisees' disciples. 'Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' Jesus replies, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Jesus' answer we are informed leaves the disciples of the Pharisees amazed. The text does not say that they returned to the Pharisees who sent them on an errand to trick him up. The question we are left to ponder is not only why did they leave amazed, but as important and more so what does Jesus' answer mean? 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' Were there time I should go around today's congregation and collect some answers, and I am sure that I would receive a number of different answers some of which would be more than a little puzzling.

At one level I don't believe that Jesus' answer is as difficult as some have made it out to be having complicated things unnecessarily, but then Satan as Scripture tells us is the master of confusion. Possibly and most probably they are not reading Jesus' answer as it is embedded within the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' priority throughout Matthew's gospel as we have been mapping for months is to teach about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the reality of God, the presence of God. Over the last few weeks we have heard Jesus tell parables about the kingdom of heaven. Earlier in Matthew's gospel we hear in quick succession three parables.

Jesus put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;... (Matthew 13.24)

He put before them another parable: ... 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ... (Matthew 13.31)

He told them another parable... 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.' Matthew 13.33)

The centrality of Jesus' teaching is about God and the kingdom of God, the reality of God, so let's scroll back even further in Matthew's gospel to one of the Temptations, which sheds a great deal of light on Jesus' answer.

"Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' (Matthew 4.8-10) There we are.

And finally to clinch this one, early in Jesus' ministry he is approached by a Pharisee, who is a lawyer, who is compelled to test him asking, 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' Jesus said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. (Matthew 22.34-27)

Throughout Matthew's gospel the priority is God, inhabiting God's kingdom and living according to God's law in God's presence. "Where two more three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)

Considering the above, our romp through Matthew's gospel and its inner coherence, Jesus' answer does not seem enigmatic, but crystal clear. 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' The application of God centred lives may indeed depend on the given situation that in all things God has priority, honour of place. God is sovereign. He rules over all things with equity, justice and mercy. All things belong to him and of thine own do we give thee. What is established is that all things in heaven and on earth are subject to God, God's kingdom and the imperatives and values of that kingdom. These are not up for grabs, as some have come to believe.

I return to the answer Jesus gives the lawyer. The lawyer gets a little bit more than he bargained for, the need to live and apply a God centred life in the ordinary, as Jesus fleshes out his answer saying, "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Jesus recognises that an earthly life, a life that he shares in as being from Nazareth, must be lived in this world in its realities. There is no escape. He will speak of wars and rumours of war. The Roman province of Palestine, Palestine a name given the geographical region by the Romans, is occupied by them. How does one live a Jewish life under Roman occupation? Jesus' life is one answer. God focussed.

Jesus in the answer he gives the lawyer affirms the legitimacy of worldly government within the necessary dominical qualifications. In general as long as the authorities give full attention to the parameters of governance as described as above as being oriented to God. Where the state serves the good of the people, it can be affirmed, especially where a people are "godly and quietly" governed to use BCP phrase. I hasten to add that the modern western nation state still imbued with a Judaeo-Christian ethic that continues to underpin it is to be a caring state and to a large extent has realised this in the realms of education and healthcare for all. It would be amiss of me not to point out that all Western states have not done an equally good job of it. But healthcare and education are being provided by

the state through tax. The judiciary is paid for the most part by tax. Already from at least the 16th century onwards the English would pray (1548), “and grant unto thy servant the King or Queen’s whole Council, and to all that are put in authority under her, that they may truly and impartially minister justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion and virtue.” Today the infrastructure is being heavily subsidised through tax. The army and the police are paid for by tax. We have a social net where people with disadvantages are protected by tax. All this is not a little and it is under “the emperor” in the form of a liberal democratic state.

The Roman state in many ways was not like our modern state in which there is much to celebrate. We can all criticise endlessly and there much to criticise and then there are those who find great delight in finding fault continuously, but we must learn to celebrate how far we have come, while remaining critically aware. All of us have entered into the labours of others. We can build up and we can tear down. There is still much to be done and much is being done. This should not be masked.

This short and definitely too short an excursion into the realms of government and its legitimacy in the eyes of Jesus is however always secondary to the focus on God, as being subject to God as he points out. He has made it clear what the first and great commandment is. Something I fear we have lost sight of favouring the second that is but ‘like it’. Our first loyalty is to God and then in God through our baptism to all who are made in the image of God. These two hang together. Our enemies too are made in the image of God and Jesus tells us to pray for them, saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

Again in this quotation we see Jesus’ and the biblical focus on heaven. Our first desire is to be children of heaven from which all else flows and through which what we think is impossible, our human measure, becomes

possible, namely to pray for our enemies that they might with us turn to the Lord. Jesus demands much of us first to keep our eyes fixed on God and His ways and then on how we are to conduct our lives before God in this world. “The emperor” too is under his judgement.

A question remains? Why were the disciples of the Pharisees who had been sent to Jesus to ask the question amazed. No answer is given. We are in the realms of speculation. I suggest having not heard Jesus before for themselves they joined a host of others as recorded at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7. 28,29) To use a modern word, they are amazed because of Jesus’ authenticity.

In a moment Sasha, Alexander, will be baptised. He has requested baptism having not been baptised as a baby. He has been thinking about baptism for a longish time, as he attends church regularly and some time ago asked to be baptised. Yes, he is young for his years, but he has requested baptism and having travelled with a number of us here for a number of years, more than many an adult I have known, we are happy to comply with his request. This is unusual but as Jesus says,

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’ (Matthew 18.1-5)