

SERMON FOR TRINITY 20 2023 | 22.10.23 at 8am

Isaiah 45: 1-7; I Thessalonians 1: 1-10; St Matthew 22: 15-22

Like many sixth formers of my generation, I got involved in debating. I won't bore you with the details of the motion except to say it is not a stand I would take today! But the point is that I was up against Roger Jackson. Roger was witty, well researched and oozing in confidence. He went on to be a band leader and I can well see him that role. He was particularly good at one-liners and in that setting I looked particularly lack lustre and unconvincing. He rightly won the debate hands down!

In today's Gospel we have a glimpse of the way Jesus had to contend with his religious opponents – Pharisees and Herodians – well versed in putting people in their place. And however smug we may feel that Jesus got the better of these horrid people, there's no doubt that he ended up being more hated at the end than he was at the beginning.

Which is strange really; think of any politician today. Apart from Gordon Brown in that famous remark caught by a live microphone in the 2010 election when he called a woman constituent a bigot - and had to apologise to her afterwards - most politicians go out of their way to avoid upsetting anyone. And it happens in Church too when 'being nice' to people can so often take the place of saying what is honest and true. Somehow we feel obliged to calm the waters and as a result we allow other people's agendas to dominate the debate because we fear being seen to be arrogant or unsympathetic. In this Gospel story, we can hear the creepy way the question is put to Jesus, full of pseudo piety and charm. By and large such an approach is very difficult to cope with.

So, appearing not to let butter melt in their mouths the Pharisees and Herodians set Jesus up with false flattery: *Teacher, we know that you are a sincere man, you are truthful and impartial...* but wait for it, here comes the barbed question: *is it OK to use Roman coins today?*

And there is the trap: any good and pious Jew wouldn't dream of using Roman coinage with the head of the Emperor on it, especially in the Temple courtyard where this event took place. Not just because it belonged to the hated Roman occupiers but because of the claims that went with the word 'Emperor'. Both the coin and its inscription claimed that this was the currency of a divine being, one that had greater divine authority than the God of Israel. So there we have it: a clear contest between two gods, Caesar or Yahweh. Which one will you pay allegiance to?

How many sermons then go on to make the point that there is a clear difference between the government and the Church, between 'ordinary lives' and the life of religious faith? Yet again this week there has been another attack in Parliament on having 26 Anglican bishops in the House of Lords. According to some, so the report says, the voting record of the bishops shows that they always vote against the government. Therefore they are a load of trendy lefties and they have no right to a privileged place on the red leather benches. Church and State should be quite distinct, as in every other democratic state like the US or France. The fact that the bishops voted against Labour government policies when they in power doesn't seem to make any difference. *Keep the Church out of politics* is the cry.

But this has to be nonsense. What is the point of trying to understand the will of God if that doesn't have an impact on how we run the whole of our lives? There was no gap between politics and faith in Jesus' time and there can't be now either.

And to make that even plainer, the Biblical scholar Marcus Borg, in his book *The First Paul*, succinctly points out the gap between the aims of the Roman state and that of Jesus. For Rome peace was only achievable through an overwhelming show of force. The famous Pax Romana, the orderly, quiet Empire was only possible when the opposition had been cowed into submission and dared not fight back.

In contrast, for St Paul peace could only be achieved when all was fair and just. To everyone.

Isn't that exactly what the situation in Gaza revolves around? Aren't both Israel and Hamas simply trying to adopt the Roman model: *we will get what we want when we can bomb our enemies into submission?* Collateral damage to civilians, to their homes and workplaces, is deemed to be simply the price to be paid for this 'final solution'. And there, for all the world to see on our TV screens, the carnage - not least at the Anglican Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza - described by Dr Hosain Naoum the Archbishop of Jerusalem as a crime against humanity.

Was Jesus' retort *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's* just a clever piece of rhetoric? Or was it a brilliant way of saying everything belongs to God? As the Shema, the verse from Deuteronomy said daily by pious Jews, reminds us: *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

Only in that way can the false division of secular and religious be squashed. *Giving to God what is God's* is to reinstate the right order of things - not by might of course but by seriously engaging with the issues.

And, as we can see in Gaza, that is by far the hardest challenge. In life in general too it is so much easier to hope that the exercise of power and authority will bring the results people want, that their status as a soldier, a lawyer, a local authority or even as an archdeacon is enough to force us to do as they want.

But then we read I Peter 3: *Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands of you an account of the hope that is in you; do it with reverence and with gentleness. Keep your conscience clear so that when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.*

***Giving to God what is God's* may take many forms but often is about being willing to engage with those who oppose us and being willing to be clear about the principles that we believe in.**

And it may well require us to go beyond 'being polite' - or worse still, giving way for the sake of an easy life. *Giving to God what is God's* may require us to stand up for what is true.

If we do not face up to those who would bully us, we are not, ultimately, giving God what is God's.

But to achieve that we may need to have the words to say: at best, like Roger Jackson in that school debate, ones which are witty, well researched, confident - and honest.