

Sunday, October 18th, 2020

Pentecost 20A: Exodus 33:12-23, Psalm 99, Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22

Trapped between a Moral View of the World and Political Reality

Introduction

The faith that shapes our lives is often cast in personal terms, and that is as it should be. Christian faith is born in our hearts and remains as a power within us that shapes our very identity. But Christian faith is not just an intimate affair of the heart, it also is a power that shapes communities, societies. Christianity is personal but equally public, Christianity is intimate but equally communitarian, of the community.

It is with that in mind that we come to the last of the series upon authority. We have spoken of authority when examined through the lens of "God's grace" as carrying *particular characteristics*: authority as forgiving, authority as addressing human need, the natural rights of people, and authority as bearing within a capacity to embrace and express love in the public sphere, the public square. Beyond these characteristics, we also spoke of authority as bearing a particular ethos: suffering or affliction. The individual or community – who carry the memory of affliction, understand and express their authority with greater wisdom.

Today we speak of authority through the lens, not of its characteristics, not of its ethos, but in terms of its root, its ground, its foundation. In so doing, we address a really problematic reading – one that you will be familiar with, but perhaps confused by: the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities – his enemies – about tax. So, let's proceed with a way in; then an overview of the Gospel reading, offering the various interpretations: and finally, an alternative reading.

The way in - let me begin with the historical figure Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England under Henry VIII, who was beheaded in 1535 on Tower Hill, London for his disagreement with the king over the issue of his divorce with Catherine of Aragon! Thomas More was more than just a victim of Henry VIII. In fact, he was a scholar of some repute and his best-known work is a piece called "Utopia" – which you can still read – where he contrasts the contentious social and political life of the various European states with the orderly and reasonable arrangements of his proposed community. In "Utopia", the fictional narrator Raphael Hythlodæus (the Greek meaning "speaker of nonsense"), talk about, the political arrangements of the imaginary island nation but also with some insight that More's ultimate problem is **the conflict between his religious creed, his moral view of the world and political reality**. Let's put this to one side for a minute and turn to the Gospel reading.

The Reading

The account from Matthew is quite credible, in as much as it is an attempt by the religious authorities to trap, to ambush Jesus. The term used for entrapment (*pagideuo*), is about hunting prey and is the only time the word is used in the New Testament. In short Matthew is making it clear that these people are out to get Jesus. Noe their question is this: "Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?" The *hinge of the trap* is implied in the word "lawful," which can refer to the imperial "law of the land" or the religious "law of God." The *twin jaws of the trap* are *sedition* if Jesus opposes the tax to Caesar, or *blasphemy* if he upholds it. As with Thomas More centuries later, Jesus is being set up between two poles: the moral divine law on the one hand and the political realities on the other. Either he will provoke the Roman authorities, or lose his acceptance among the Jewish crowds.

But what of Jesus' response? It is rather astute. "Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God." But what is Jesus saying here? What does he mean?

Alternative Interpretations

Well, it depends who you ask. But basically, there are three interpretations. The first, view is that it is dangerous to build too much on this altercation between Jesus and the religious authorities. As one commentator says: "it is after all a bit anecdotal". I wonder about that. If it were so anecdotal why does Matthew mention it at all in his gospel? Presumably, for Matthew it carried weight.

The second, interpretation is that in this altercation Jesus acknowledges that the world is complex, that our allegiances are always multiple, that our commitments to God have to sit, albeit uncomfortably with others, including those toward the state. With this in mind, some commentators suggest that Jesus is an 'early day' modernist, an exponent of the "Two Kingdom Theology" of the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, an advocate for the separation of church and state, as in fact did come about after the religious wars in Europe: a space for God and a space for everything else. I also wonder about this. Is it really the case that Jesus just happily happens to anticipate today's political approach?

The final view, is that while Jesus acknowledges that the state (Caesar) demands allegiance, the allegiance to God is ultimate: *everything belongs to God*. As one commentator put it, "Jesus' statement about attending to "the things that are God's" prompts us to recognize how all-encompassing that category is. It overshadows the rights and allegiances any empire might demand for itself".

A Way Forward Amid the Lack of Consensus

How to navigate our way through these varying interpretations? Let me offer my sense in the light of both my theological work but also my political experience! I think that Jesus' response to his enemies about allegiance to Rome is significant, not just an anecdotal, throw-away comment. In it, Jesus acknowledges the claims the state makes – it is not an enthusiastic endorsement as such – just an acceptance of the facts. Added to this, he then brings God into the equation in a way that his opponents had not. "Give to God the things that are Gods". In short, everything is ultimately God's. The points I would make from this are twofold.

The first is this – perhaps more negative: that our allegiance to the state and other things, including the economic and social systems that are part of our collective lives, must be conditional upon that deeper allegiance to the kingdom. It is a question of delicately, subtly, thinking things through on a case-by-case basis: issues of justice, issues of power, issues of governance: hence the need for intelligent Christianity and intelligent Christians.

But there is a second conclusion I would make as well, that is more positive: that these realities, these systems, with which we contend, put up with, but also at times, from which we benefit, are the necessary reference points for faith to be lived out at all. Faith, living the kingdom, cannot be done in a historical vacuum, amid nothingness. It requires reference points– realities – no matter how difficult we may find them. How to sum this up?

Authority is grounded in God, the father of Jesus Christ. But authority is also distributed through the systems which we build and which shape us. Both are necessary and both co-exist: sometimes creatively and well, but often destructively. **The eternal problem and risk, as Thomas More and**

Jesus himself discovered, is that we are caught on the horns of each. Welcome to the struggle of the Christian life!