

29th Sunday Year A

Matthew 22.15-21 God and Caesar?

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Each week I tell myself to start thinking about my next sermon as soon as the last one is over. I rarely succeed, but this week I managed it. I looked at the readings on Sunday, and discovering that my text was to be the familiar passage about rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar's, I reflected on the many ways in which that text is misused. I decided to introduce my ideas by talking about the Barmen Declaration, the theological rejection of Nazi ideology and its distorting effects on Christianity in 1930s Germany. I was, then, more than a bit miffed when on Tuesday I heard the Bishop of Leeds, on Thought for the Day, musing upon the very same thing. So I feel I should emphasise the chronology here: his broadcast has nothing to do with my sermon. And I hope you realise how offended I would be were it thought that I needed theological inspiration from the Bishops of the Church of England.

The so-called German Christian movement was a pro-Nazi alliance of churchpeople who welcomed the anti-Semitism and Aryanization which characterized the religious policies of Hitler's government. Nazi iconography had begun to appear in churches, the Jewish basis of Christianity was being disavowed, and the ideas of theologians such as Luther were being adduced in support of the idea that the church should have nothing to do with politics or the state. Protestant leaders and theologians who opposed them came together at a synod in May 1934 in the town of Wuppertal-Barmen, and issued a flat rejection of this blasphemous agenda. The declaration begins

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" and of the present Reich Church Administration, which are ravaging the Church and at the same time also shattering the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

The principal author of the declaration was Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, he was deprived of his chair at Bonn the following year, returning to his native Switzerland, whence he continued to oppose fascism for the rest of his life.

The Barmen Declaration is one of many Christian attempts over the centuries to oppose the heresy that Christianity and politics are unrelated. No Bible text is more frequently cited in defence of such a view, than the reading we heard this morning – render to Caesar those things that are Caesars. Those who wish to be undisturbed by the gospel, are understandably keen to keep faith and the church in its place. But such a view has no basis in scripture or the teaching of Jesus. Indeed, when considering the life and teaching of Jesus, talk of the state in anything like its modern

sense is so anachronistic as to do violence to the text of the Bible.

The question concerning the paying of taxes to Caesar is intended as a trap. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Either Jesus makes himself unpopular with the people by affirming the legality of Roman taxation, or he gets himself into trouble with the authorities by encouraging non-payment. But Jesus is only too aware of their intentions. Though they have flattered him as a holy teacher who cares nothing for earthly reputation, he recognises that what governs their intention is malice. He calls them out for their hypocrisy. Then he asks to be shown a coin, and asks whose image and inscription it bears. When they answer “Caesar”, he utters his final word, and they are dumbfounded.

Archaeological evidence tells us lots about the coin itself. It will have been a denarius minted in Lugdunum, now Lyons, and it would have borne two

images, not one, Tiberius on one side and probably his mother Livia on the other. We also know that graven images were anathema to the Jewish people, so by holding up the coin Jesus is exposing both the provocative nature of the question, and the hypocrisy of the questioners, those who prefer the Roman conqueror to their own people, laws and customs; who have aligned themselves politically to the oppressor.

But Jesus' response is not political, or rather, it is not something which belongs in the realm of politics. His answer is intended to remind us that, in theological terms, there is no realm of politics, there is no realm of anything, other than the realm, the Kingdom, of God. And talk of the Kingdom of God undermines all talk of earthly rulers. The words "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's", are read by some to mean "give back to Caesar that which is Caesar's": in other words, money is the stuff of the emperor, why ask a stupid question? But there is a further subtlety in the evangelist's telling of this story, because the

Greek verb put in Jesus mouth implies a little more: not so much give back, as render what is due. Plato uses it when he has Socrates note that it wouldn't just or right to give back the weapons of someone who had gone mad. Jesus isn't explicitly affirming that the coin is Caesar's due, rather he seems to be saying "If it is due to Caesar, then give it to him". But whether or not it is, give that which is due to God, to God.

The second statement both qualifies and clarifies the first. Jesus is not identifying two separate areas of concern and influence, one political and the other theological. Quite the opposite. Rather he is ridiculing the emperor's claim to genuine sovereignty, by holding him up as a tiny little image, as a puny example of human pride in the world which is created by the Lord, the God of Israel. Our first reading, from second Isaiah, made the same point. Cyrus, the conquering king of Persia, is described as the Lord's anointed – the word messiah, no less – because he is the Lord's instrument, despite knowing nothing of the God of

Israel. His military success is simply evidence that he is part of God's plan.

To render to god those things which are God's is not to give some things, as appropriate, to God. It is to recognize that God, the creator of all things, does not and cannot compete for power, but is rather the basis for all human existence, the reason why there are conquerors and emperors, the reason why human ambition imposes itself upon others through violence and subjugation and slavery. True power, belongs only to God. The ultimately insignificant world of military and monetary gain may seem to be important, but decisions such as whether or not to pay a tax, collapse into almost meaningless obscurity compared with the priorities of God bringing about his rule and his reign on earth by ushering in the Kingdom of his son.

To acknowledge is always to deny that there is anything which does not belong to him. Dictators and demagogues, as much today as in the 1930s, may

distort faith as a buttress for their tyranny. The faith they employ, is not that of Jesus Christ. Or we as individuals can pretend to ourselves that Christianity is one little section of who we are and what we do, and to carry on regardless in every other sphere of our activity. If we do, our faith is not Christian. Instead, we believe in God the creator, we recognize that our place in this world is only ours because we are enabled by God to share in the gift of life which belongs, like everything else, only and ultimately to him. There is no dominion of Caesar, there is only the Kingdom of God.