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Setting a good example

Bible reading: Matthew 17:22-27

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.' And they were greatly distressed.

When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?' He said, 'Yes, he does.' And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?' When Peter said, 'From others', Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the lake and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.'

Reflection

There is an old adage attributed to Benjamin Franklin, which suggests that there is nothing sure in life except death and taxes. In our reflections this week, our gospel reading seems to mention both, which led me to the immediate panic, 'where do I go with this?'

In the flow of the story of Jesus, our reading comes after the healing of the demon-possessed boy and the transfiguration; Jesus is on-route to Jerusalem and begins to prepare his disciples for the events which are to come. I find it interesting that in Mark's parallel account, Jesus' prediction of his death is followed immediately by the disciples jostling for positions of power and significance; perhaps not the greatest display of a follower of Jesus. However, it is this that began to trigger my thoughts about the example we set as Christians and reflect on my own behaviour.

Don't worry; this is not a public confession of unpaid taxes. Still, I am challenged by the example we perhaps inadvertently set, colouring far more of people's opinions about us as followers of Jesus than perhaps we might think. We have over the past few months seen numerous examples where COVID-19 restrictions have been ignored by our politicians, by trips to test eyesight, train journeys and accepting invitations to meals with more than six people. Perhaps this has impacted the response to the restrictions of many, in which we have thought they apply to everyone else but us?

The restrictions we find ourselves experiencing are undoubtedly frustrating, and at times seem to defy logic (why can I not feed the ducks with my grandchildren and family, yet can shoot the ducks with thirty of my friends?) However, as disciples of Jesus, our call I believe is to be obedient and set good examples for others. The phrase translated as 'not offending' in verse 27 might not be the most helpful

interpretation; its original meaning is more akin to not causing a stumbling block or setting a bad example. How might we ensure we are setting a good example today?

A practical outworking might perhaps include when it comes to services in our buildings, ensuring we observe all the guidelines for social distancing and maintaining levels of cleaning. Setting a good example means not breaking the rule of six, even if we think no one will ever know. Going forward, it might even necessitate some sacrificial choices about our buildings remaining open, reminding ourselves that we, not our buildings, are the church. Being a good citizen and a good Christian go hand in hand.

The gospel reading also encourages us to be an example of hope, which is especially pertinent in the world today. In his conversation with his disciples, Jesus tells them that death is not the end; I think they mostly missed this, given their grief-filled, power-grabbing response. I believe part of our calling as disciples today is to be living reminders of hope, of lives transformed, of future promise, of kingdom values which impact the here and now. If we are to challenge some of the injustices of what is happening today, let us do it with the subversive message of the kingdom of God; loving the lost, the least, the last. Speaking up for those whose voices are missing and seeing the Christ in all we meet. It might mean a 'paying of taxes' or whatever the equivalent parallel might be today, but this may well be the better example for us to set if we really want to change the world.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

You love us all and make us your sisters and brothers.

You call us to follow you.

You invite us to announce the Good News.

Lord, grant us the courage to live our commitment.

Teach us to go beyond our borders.

Teach us to discover you in the lowliest

Teach us to see with the eyes of faith

Teach us to be examples that proclaim your kingdom,

To our neighbour, our authorities, and those throughout the whole world.

Help us be the light which burns between hope and despair,

Giving hope to the hopeless, the grieving, the forgotten.

Live, Lord Jesus in our hearts, forever!

Transform us to be your example of love.

We ask this in the name of the Father,

and of the Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Response

- Send a card of encouragement to your council or local authority on behalf of your church, thanking them for what they are doing, and promising to uphold them in prayer (I am sure you will choose far better words!)
- Take time out with others this week to intensively pray for the government and the opposition, the scientific advisors, and our police force. Pray as you sense the Spirit leading but pray particularly for clarity in communication on any further restrictions.
- Re-familiarise yourself with the government guidance on 'safe use of places of worship' and ensure you, as well as your church community, are compliant.

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