

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday October 18, 2020 – Trinity 19
Reading – Matthew 22:15-22 (Pay to Caesar)
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Black lives matter – 3 simple words but the reaction I get depends on who is listening to me and where they sit at the political table. In the same way, if you go with me when next I make a trip to Nigeria and I start a conversation about the effects of colonisation, the reactions and responses depend very much on who my listeners are and the roles their grandfathers and great-grandfathers played during the colonial period. If their families benefitted from the colonial masters, then colonisation had some redeeming graces but for those whose family members got no favours during the period then colonisation was nothing but the evil men do.

In our reading today we come across 2 similar groups. The Pharisees, a religious group, opposed to the Roman occupation of Palestine and the Herodians, a political party in support of Herod Antipas and the policies instituted by Rome. Normally, these two groups were bitter enemies, but here they united against Jesus. Thinking that they had a fool-proof plan to corner him, they asked Jesus about paying Roman taxes. If Jesus agreed that it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees would say that he was opposed to God – the only King the Israelites recognised. If Jesus said the taxes should not be paid, the Herodians would hand him over to Herod for rebellion. The twist in this story is that the Pharisees were not motivated by love for God's laws and the Herodians were not motivated by love for Roman justice, therefore, their evil motives was exposed by the answer Jesus gave.

Let us pay attention to V. 22 – “When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” These religious and political leaders admired Jesus' sagacity in discovering and evading a snare which they thought was so craftily laid to entrap him. One would think they would have been so amazed they would follow him and submit to him, but no, they marvelled and left him. For 3 Sundays, we have considered 3 parables of Jesus – the parable of the 2 sons in which Israel is portrayed like a child who promises to obey but fails to make good on the promise, followed by the parable of the vineyard portraying Israel's rejection of Jesus as being consistent with the behaviour of their ancestors throughout history, then the parable of the wedding feast which points out that Israel's repudiation of the call of God to enter his Kingdom through Jesus will cause God to invite the Gentiles into the Kingdom.

So, when the Son of God stood in front of these religious and political leaders and says, “What do you think your duty to God might be?” The answer seemed obvious. Their duty was to use all their knowledge of God to recognize his Son and lead others to do the same. But that was the one thing they were absolutely determined not to do.

Jesus avoided their trap and revealed that we have dual citizenship. On earth, we are citizens of our nations, but our eternal home is heaven. We are citizens of heaven – our final destination and home. We should not confuse the two realms because their values, currencies and economies are different. Our citizenship on earth requires we pay money for the services and benefits we receive.

Our citizenship in the Kingdom of heaven requires that we pledge to God our commitment and obedience.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” What does that mean for us today? I think that Jesus was not saying that the civil and religious spheres of life have nothing to do with each other. Neither did he say that one may swallow up the other. It will be easy if God was like Caesar and all we need to do is pay our taxes annually. Unlike Caesar, God doesn’t have a share or a percentage in our belongings or money, he owns us. Everything we have comes from him and he doesn’t need anything from us because everything on earth and in heaven is his. Our duty, therefore, is to love him with all our hearts and do his will in total surrender.

Jesus avoided an untimely confrontation by indicating that the terms of the question involved a more complex tension of values. Jesus says to you and I this morning, “Let Caesar have his tax coin, all of your life belongs to God.” How will I respond and how will you respond?