

PREACHING 22nd OCT '17 GS & CC Isa 45:1-7 MAT 22 :15-22

Sometimes we forget just how clever Jesus was. We've no excuse for that this morning. Here he was, in Jerusalem, teaching in a public place, surrounded by enemies itching to trap him into making an unguarded statement which would do massive damage to his reputation. They tried it several times. Here they thought they'd hit the jackpot – he couldn't possibly wriggle out of this one.

First comes the flattery. *'Teacher, we know that you are a sincere man.....'*. Then comes the unanswerable question: *'Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?'* Unanswerable, because whatever answer he tried to give, Jesus was bound to offend someone. If he said *'NO'*, he would please the Jewish patriots but within hours, maybe minutes, he would be under arrest. If he said, *'YES, you ought to pay'*, he would be labelled a collaborator, or maybe a blasphemer, because Caesar was described on his coins as something of a god. Jesus's answer to the question asked was, *'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'*.

Let's find out what Jesus meant by this statement. Perhaps, the easiest way of doing this is to try to understand first what he DIDN'T SAY.

FIRSTLY, Jesus didn't say, *'Give to God the things that are Caesar's'*. Christians, like non-Christians have a duty to support Caesar – which we know in our day and age as the Government/the State.

Suppose we were to give to God the things that are Caesar's (the things that are the States). If, for instance, we paid our taxes to the church, and not to the Inland Revenue! Our collections would rocket, and we'd have the joy of seeing Stephanie Hemming/John Biddulph, our Church Treasurer, beaming from ear to ear:

but we wouldn't be fulfilling our responsibility as a citizen; let alone as a Christian. The Government has a right to expect the support of those who have elected them for its lawful activities. Our taxes go to help pay for these lawful activities – education, health services, emergency services, houses, roads and so on.

Also the Government of a democratic society demands that electors are informed about great issues, and take a part in ruling that society. And so it is the Christian responsibility to take part in government as far as possible; perhaps by joining the local branch of the party of his or her choice, or by simply taking time to become really informed on matters of public interest, rather than relying on what the popular tabloids churn out. The government has the right to the support of the electorate for its lawful activities.

But suppose the activities of the government are not lawful, or are not moral This brings us to the SECOND THING Jesus didn't say.

Jesus didn't say *'give to Caesar the things that are God's'*. Governments don't have the right to stop the statement and the practice of faith. This has never been seriously questioned by any of the three great religions of the world: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. To these religions, *'religion'* has never been about what goes on in churches, temples or synagogues; *'religion'* has always meant life. God created life, God created the world, God created mankind; and so life, the world and mankind are God's, not Caesars.

Governments do hold responsibility for governing, but their responsibility ultimately is not to Caesar, or to themselves – their responsibility is to GOD.

Nobody seriously questions the basic Christian responsibility to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Loving our neighbour is certainly to do with being kind, helpful and good to our family, neighbours, friends and work colleagues, but in the modern world it is also about making sure

your neighbour has good housing and health and schooling. Loving our neighbour means ensuring as far as possible that he or she has freedom to develop their God-given personality.

If a government's policies mean these things are forbidden to our neighbour, then Caesar is abusing his authority – he is claiming powers that are rightfully God's. If Christians don't give to God the things that are Caesar's, they certainly don't either give to Caesar the things that are God's.

God's things are not what happens in churches, synagogues and temples, and Caesar's things everything else. We don't need to look any further than Jesus to see this demonstrated. He spoke out against social abuses, about miscarriages of justice. He spoke out on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the persecuted, the marginalised and the forgotten.

We have already heard about what Jesus didn't say, and we've heard a little about what he did say. So what did he mean in our Gospel reading,

'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'

In the first place, it was a clever way out of a clever trap. If Jesus, the Jew, had come down on the side of paying taxes only to Caesar, the Roman, then the Jewish leaders would have evidence of his being a traitor. If he had said, 'Do not pay taxes to Caesar, the Herodians would have persuaded Caesar to hear charges of treason.

In fact, Jesus's answer to the question, *'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* was that Jews were to pay a double tax – one to the Temple, and one to Rome.

Jesus therefore said, *'Pay both taxes: give both Caesar and God their dues'*. And because the Herodians approved of one and the Pharisees the other, neither could take offence.

Do not give to God the things that are Caesar's.

Do not give to Caesar the things that are God's.

This world is God's not Caesar's. Therefore Christians treat all people as God's. Although Jesus did not come to establish a particular political teaching, what he says and does has profound political consequences.

Although Jesus did not come to establish a particular political programme, his actions have revolutionary consequences.

Although Jesus preached a revolution, it was not a revolution of either the right or the left.

Jesus refused to divide people into friends and enemies. He didn't even say 'don't pay your taxes to Caesar. He combines severe criticism of ruthless rulers with calls not to murder them. He calls us to do good to those who hate us; to bless those who curse us; to pray for those who persecute us.

The revolution that Jesus brings in is that we should love our enemies, not destroy them. That we forgive and not retaliate. That we bless the peacemaker, not the aggressor.

As there is no doubt that Christians should support the lawful and moral activity of a government, there is no doubt that they should criticise the unlawful or immoral actions of a government. If a government is racist or sexist a Christian condemns it. For in Christ there is no such thing as Jew and gentile, slave and freeman, male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus, we are all God's. Amen.

