

**SERMON AT LESMURDIE 20/10/99: Mtt 22:15-33: OS 29: GEOFF CHADWICK:**

**"A TAXING TIME FOR JESUS"**

This year has been the liturgical year of Matthew. We have nearly come to the end of that year. Advent (the start of the next liturgical year) is only 5 weeks away, and so we begin to get to the end of Mtt's gospel. As we approach the end of this Gospel we get closer to the events of crucifixion and resurrection, and the closer we get to these events the more the hostility towards Jesus is recorded.

So, we read today of hostility. Jesus is surrounded by three groups and tested by them. The Pharisees try to trap Jesus with a political question over the paying of taxes.

The Herodians who would have been supportive of the Roman Emperor's policies would have been keen to hear Jesus' answer regarding taxes.

And the Saducees who took issue with Jesus on a number of religious questions, especially the resurrection of the dead.

So, Jesus gets confronted with three issues:

The first issue, from the Pharisees is the issue of idolatry. The Pharisees resented paying taxes to the Roman Emperor. There were several reasons for this including the dislike of having a foreign power taking wealth out of the country. More than this, is the fact that the coins of the Roman Empire at this time had an inscription around the head of the emperor were read: "*divus et pontifex maximus*", which means "Divine and greatest high priest". As you will realise such an inscription around a graven image was totally repugnant to the strict religious views of the Pharisees.

The question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" (Mtt 22:17, NRSV), is more than a question about taxation policies, It is a question about worshiping a false god.

Jesus' answer: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's" (Mtt 22:21, NRSV), simply tells the Pharisees to give the emperor and God the rightful things that they deserve.

Secondly, the Herodians were on the sidelines hearing all of this. They supported the Romans because it was politically expedient to do so. They were waiting for Jesus to endorse

their stand. But Jesus failed to do this. His answer was just as unsatisfactory to them as it was to the Pharisees.

After this taxing question, the Saducees, who didn't like the Pharisees, then decide to "have a go" at Jesus. They present a third religious issue concerning the resurrection. They tried to trick him with an absurd question. "A widow's husband had seven brothers..."

Whenever you get asked an absurd hypothetical question you can be almost sure that the questioner is not really interested in an answer but is more interested in making you look foolish. In this encounter, however, Jesus uses the teachings of the Saducees themselves to show them just how absurd their question was. They went away "astounded at his teaching." "Astounded does not mean they agreed with him.

So in these encounters Jesus does not make any friends. In fact the encounters become a catalyst for further hostility towards Jesus and his final crucifixion.

Now this is all very curious, but what has it got to do with us today? What lessons for our present situation can we glean from this gospel story?

Well, I think there are three lessons.

Firstly, the issue of giving to the emperor what is the emperor's and giving to God what is God's.

Secondly, the issue of politics using religion for its own ends.

And thirdly, the issue of getting tangled up in absurd religious questions and arguments.

Let's have a closer look.

### **1) The issue of giving to the emperor what is the emperor's and giving to God what is God's.**

All of us lead lives of divided loyalty. We have to make choices about our use of time, money and energy. Sometimes we get the balance right and at other times we get "out of kilter". So how are you going at the moment? Are you working too hard and neglecting the family? Are you so wrapped up in the family that you have no time for the wider community? Does God get a space (well he must get some space because you are here this morning!)?

If your life seems out of balance at the moment then you may need to reassess what is really important and what is unnecessary. Take out your diary for the last year and consider what you have been doing. This will form a good basis to make sure you continue to "Give... to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's" (Mtt 22:21, NRSV).

## **2) The issue of politics using religion for its own ends.**

One of the sad lessons of history is that politics has used religion for its own ends. If Jesus had have endorsed to policies of the Herodians (who supported the Romans) they would have use him as a religious ally: "The prophet supports what we stand for!" How often have people justified their own political agenda by claiming that God was on their side? Such a practice not only distorts religion it also distorts what may otherwise be a helpful view of God. We must beware of using God to support our own political agenda. If anything it should be the other way around. We should support God's agenda with our political agenda. This, of course is not easy. Separating out our own motivations, wants and desires from those of the greater good of all is not easy. It requires discernment, sensitivity and honesty. These are the hallmarks of true politics - discernment, sensitivity and honesty - having just come from Synod I continue to live in hope.

## **3) The issue of getting tangled up in absurd religious questions and arguments.**

I as much as many others enjoy getting tangled up in curly and fascinating religious questions. I love playing with ideas. But there is a danger. Good though this is, one can fall into the trap of loving the discussion and argument for its own sake. Exploring absurd questions can be a way of distracting oneself from the hard questions of life. Sometimes this can lead to a lot of talk about a problem without ever doing anything about their problem (this even happens in Parish Council meetings!). Sometimes we can use questioning as a way of avoiding an issue. We can talk around and around an issue until we are exhausted without ever addressing it directly. (Problem avoidance also occurs in Parish Council meetings!)

This is the danger of getting tangled up in absurd religious questions. It can lead us to creative insights but it can also be a way of avoiding reality.

Have you had any absurd discussions lately?

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So today we have of some traps put before Jesus concerning the payment of taxes, idolatry, politics and religion. Such traps continue for us. The challenges before Jesus are also our challenges. We are challenged in how we use our time, money and energy. We are challenged in how we use our religious beliefs for political purposes. And we are challenged in how we seek answers to our religious questions.

May Christ our saviour be our example in all these matters.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**