

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Trinity 19

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Isaiah 45:1-7

Ps 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

**Matthew 22:15-22**

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

“Give to God the things that are God’s”

The end of Jesus’ answer to the question “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?”

I am starting with it, because I think it is a good summary of our calling as human beings: to live everyday offering to God what is God’s.

It asks us to look at all that we are and all that we have and use **for** God anything that we have received **from** God.

It is a summing up of much of what I said last week about living as those who know we are dependent on God.

We will come back to a particular way of living like this towards the end of what I am going to say because from a passage full of complexity I think it may be the main invitation for us today.

But let’s go back to the whole passage and explore what might have been going on for the first listeners to it; and how it has been used since.

The way Matthew tells this story, Jesus is in the Temple and has been telling parables suggest an unfavourable comparison of the unexpected followers of Jesus with members of the religious establishment who are increasingly in conflict with him. This is the first of a series of planted questions to discredit Jesus. The Herodians and the disciples of the Pharisees seem unlikely allies: the former trying to preserve the fragile goodwill of their Roman

occupiers, the latter concerned to preserve the purity of a people who are called to be God's priestly nation.

Taxes to the Emperor: taxes to the hated occupiers, taxes to one who was at times considered something of a god: if Jesus says yes to taxes, surely he loses credibility with so many of those who recognise in him a message of liberation.

No taxes for the emperor: and he reveals himself as an agitator and revolutionary and an open target for the Roman authorities.

Jesus will not be tricked or trapped by hypocrisy and malice.

He calls for a coin and receives a denarius: a coin that, some commentators suggest, should not have been brought into the Temple according to the rules of cleanliness, so making visible the hypocrisy he criticises.

And then he offers an answer that goes deeper than their malice.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's"

And his challengers' response is amazement.

Through Christian history this enigmatic statement has taken on a wider general application as it has often been found at the heart of fierce debates about what the relationship of the Christian community to the rulers of the day should be.

Are Christians called to respectful obedience to their political rulers as instruments of God as the guidance of some of the epistles and the theology of Isaiah into today's Old Testament reading suggests?

Or as followers of the one crucified by the political rulers of the day are we called to subvert the powers that be?

I wonder where you stand: does your faith guide you towards seeing God's hand in political processes, or does it keep you suspicious of anyone who seems to wield power? Do you think governments should be agents of Christian values, or should church be fiercely independent of the state?

During some periods of history and in some contexts this question has been more urgent than others: we could put the widespread existence of Christianity across the world down to the conversion of Constantine and the acceptance of Christianity as the imperial religion. Conversely the role of Christian resistance to the Nazis, to apartheid, to oppressive regimes in parts of Latin America (even when established churches failed in each of these) seem evidently right.

“Give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and give to God what is God’s”

From its first century context, through the challenges of historical Christian response to world powers and culture, to these lines coming to us in North Devon today – how are we to respond?

I think it is by starting with becoming very clear what of all that we are and all that we have is “God’s”, and allowing our awareness of that to guide us in the way we relate to the world.

Last week we thought about this in terms of our creaturely dependence guiding all our decisions about the way we use the gifts of creation.

This week perhaps we can go a step further and bring into focus how our awareness of all that is from God in our lives guides how we relate to those in power and how we use our own power too: how we live as good citizens accepting or challenging where our faith calls us to.

This prayer exercise helps us to get right back to an awareness of seeking to allow all that we are and do be guided by knowing what is of God.

I am drawing ideas from the final exercise of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

It invites us to ponder slowly and call to mind in three ways, how God has blessed us:

First we ask God to give us an inner sense of all the good things God give us.

Then we reflect on the gifts of our own existence –the creaturely dependence I talked of last time: being created as ourselves, the blessings in our life, and the gifts of baptism and communion and this fellowship in which we come close to God.

We reflect on the self-gift of God to us in Jesus' companionship and in the life of the Holy Spirit at work in us, our communion with Jesus and the fact that we have become by baptism Temples of the Holy Spirit

We reflect on the on going work of God in holding all that sustains us in being, in bringing forth love and goodness even where they seem lacking, and all the labour for God that we recognise through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

We reflect on the daily gifts of God: from the light of the Sun the beauty of the earth.....all that we receive.

And Ignatius asks us then to question ourselves – if we fully know all this to be given by God what might we want to offer God, not in trade but in love and gratitude?

He offers a prayer, the prayer that is my daily answer to "Give to God what is God's:

Take Lord and receive: all my liberty, my understanding, my intellect and my entire will- all that I have and call my own. You have given it all to me. To you Lord, I return it. Everything is yours, do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me. Amen.