

Give to God what is God's

In this current global economic situation I am reminded of the story in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 22: 20-21), of Jesus being questioned about the right to pay or not to pay tax. Remember he is given a coin, which is an indication that he did not have one on him, and he asks whose head is on the coin when those present reply the emperor's Jesus says, "Give to the emperor what is his and to God what is God's."

This gospel story as with most lends itself to being acted out rather than read as a record of dialogue, because only when we actually live out the story can it come alive. Jesus' retort to the students who attempt to trap him is a masterful piece of repartee. He avoids being ensnared by the question without really solving the issue; he doesn't advise them to pay the tax and he doesn't advise them not to pay it. He does advise them to know the difference between the claims of the emperor and the claims of God.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were continually challenging Jesus about matters of law because many laws bound the Jews; in fact there were 613 different commandments in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Of these 365 were negative commands beginning with 'you shalt not' and 248 with 'you shall'. The Pharisees were skilled at interpreting the law but in this case they sent their students. They did not risk going themselves because if their trap succeeded, they could not be blamed whereas if their trap failed they would not be ridiculed.

They instructed their students on the question to ask, with the aim of trapping Jesus because this was clearly a dilemma for whatever answer Jesus gives could be used against Him.

To understand the significance of this dilemma we need to understand the Palestine of those days it was not a simple society of peasant farmer's artisans and fishermen, as I used to imagine. By 63 BC the Romans had colonised Palestine and in accordance with their policy of appointing native rulers they eventually made Herod the king of the Jews. In Jesus time Herod the Great died and his kingdom was divided up. However, there was rebellion to this authority brought on to some extent by the weakness of the leaders appointed by the Romans, but due primarily to the issue of taxation.

The Jews objected on religious grounds to paying the tax and rose up in rebellion. The leader of this rebellion was Judas the Galilean, who founded a religiously inspired movement of freedom fighters called Zealots. The Roman response was to crucify two thousand of them. The Zealots were an underground group of rebels loosely organised but, as a result of the Roman resistance they became organised and for 60 years they harassed the Roman army. The last group held out at the fortress of Masada until 73 CE when nearly a thousand of them chose to commit suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. The Zealots were faithful Jews, zealous for the law and for the sovereignty and kingship of God.

Another important group operating at this time were the Pharisees. They paid their taxes to Rome but, did so under protest. They separated themselves from others whom they considered not faithful to the law and traditions. Their name means 'the separate ones'. They believed in an after-life, in the resurrection of the dead and in a future Messiah whom God would send to liberate them from the Romans.

A third group the Essenes went even further than the Pharisees in striving for perfection. They separated themselves completely and led a celibate life in camps in the desert. This separation and commitment to the rites of purification was done because they believed the end of the world was near. They were just as warlike as the Zealots but they did not think that the time was right for rebellion. It is possible that John the Baptist was an Essene, however he broke with their tradition when he offered baptism to all comers.

Then there were the Sadducees they were the conservatives who clung to the ancient Hebrew traditions. Rewards and punishment were to be found in this life. They collaborated with the Romans and endeavoured to maintain the status quo. The Sadducees also included the scribes who were lawyers, teachers and men of learning. They were often from the landed aristocracy and seen as the leaders of the people. They did not believe in an after life, but that reward and punishment was found in this life.

This is the scene in which Jesus enters not the quiet country life we may have imagined; add to this the fact that Jesus was himself a fugitive after his confrontation in the temple with the money changers.

Jesus sets out to liberate Israel from Rome but, not as the Zealots do, he wants to do this by persuading Israel to change. Without a change of heart within Israel itself, liberation of any kind would not be possible. As Jesus saw it, the only way to be liberated from your enemies was to love them, to do good to those who hate you and to pray for those who treat you badly.

This does not mean that you resign yourself to the oppression, nor is it a matter of killing people with kindness. It is a matter of reaching down to the root cause of oppression and domination: which is humanity's lack of compassion.

The Jews could overthrow the Romans, but if they still lacked compassion they would not be liberated.

The Zealots wanted a mere change of government from Roman to Jewish. Jesus wanted a change that would effect every department of life; he wanted a qualitatively different world. Jesus saw what no one else was able to see that there was more exploitation and domination from within Judaism than there was without. The people had to suffer more oppression at the hands of the Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes and Zealots than on account of the Romans. The protest against Roman oppression was hypocritical and this is the very point that Jesus makes in this gospel reading, 'Give to Caesar what is his and to God what is God's.'

Jesus' answer reveals not only the hypocrisy and insincerity of the question but also the real motive behind the taxation issue, namely greed for money. The people who ask the question are in possession of Roman coins, coins that were seen as the personal property of the ruler who issued them. It is not God's money but Caesar's if you refuse to give it back to him it can only be because you are a lover of money. If you really wished to give to God what belonged to God then you would sell your possessions and give to the poor, you would give up your desire for power prestige and possessions. It is interesting to note that Jesus is not carrying a coin and has to ask someone for one.

The real issue was oppression itself not the fact that a pagan Roman dared to oppress God's chosen people. **The root cause of oppression was humanity's lack of compassion.** Those who resented Roman oppression but overlooked their own oppression of the poor were lacking in compassion as much, if not more so, than the Romans.

The struggles of the Zealots had nothing whatsoever to do with genuine liberation. They were fighting for Jewish nationalism, Jewish racialism, Jewish superiority and Jewish prejudice.

True liberation means taking up the cause of people as human beings. To love your enemy is to live in solidarity with all people. The revolution that Jesus wanted to bring about was far more radical than anything the Zealots or anyone else may have had in mind. Liberation is only possible when all people are afforded true justice.

Every sphere of life, political, economic, social and religious was radically questioned by Jesus and turned upside down. In all of the parables Jesus emphasises the God of compassion rather than the God of holiness and his criticism of the Zealots is not because they were too political; his criticism as with the Pharisees and the Essenes is that they are too religious and this is a loveless religion. What led the Pharisees to oppress the poor and the Zealots to assassinate fellow Jews who betrayed them, it was their religious fanaticism.

One of the most significant causes of oppression, discrimination and suffering in that society was religion – the loveless religion of religious fanatics – the religion of human beings.

Without compassion religious beliefs are useless and empty; without compassion all politics will be oppressive, even the politics of revolution.

Surely, the most surprising thing in the gospels is that Jesus preached about a religio-political 'kingdom' from which the religious of the day were excluded or rather from which they would exclude themselves. **According to Matthew Jesus told them that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God and not you.**

It would have been impossible for the religious people of Jesus time to see him as a religious person. They would have seen him as a blasphemously irreligious man who under the cloak of religion was undermining all the values

upon which religion, politics, economics and society were based. He was a dangerous, subversive revolutionary who must be done away with, and that is exactly what happened because we couldn't cope with the truth of His message.

Let us give thanks to a God that challenges us to get our priorities right, then and only then we can put compassion before power, profit and religious zeal.

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