

Matthew's weekly musing, 23rd October 2020

God and Caesar part 2

Since last week's Musing, I have enjoyed responses by way of two 'harrumphs' and eight 'Hoorays'. I particularly appreciated an exchange with one of the Grateley congregation.



You will recall that, last week, I began my musing like this:

... quoting the famous Gospel saying. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

My final paragraphs were these:

"'Give to Caesar' can be understood like this:

Part of our quest for holiness is a recognition and acknowledgement of the authorities (constitution, rule of law, etc). There is an *explicit* call to holiness in this recognition. So we keep the letter of the law.

And 'Give to God' can be understood like this:

(This struck me most forcibly.) There is a strong *implicit* and moral imperative here, i.e. our quest for holiness goes beyond the letter of the law and into the spirit of the law. This is part of our obedience to God.

Thus tax avoidance, however sophisticated and however near or far from the letter of the law, doesn't help with our quest for holiness. In tax avoidance we have succumbed to the realm of law and lost touch with the realm of grace."

My Grateley correspondent is John Norman, and he is happy for me to share our correspondence with you. He is South African, so the issues of obedience to the law and the quest for holiness have been acute for him.

John emailed:

"Thanks for the email and the musings, which always stimulate the thought process. I am sure you have had a full response to your letter this week, as it is a very difficult and challenging passage.

As you so rightly point out, we should follow the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. The moral dilemma arises when one regards the law as unjust. In the dark days of the apartheid laws in South Africa, I felt quite justified and morally correct in bending or avoiding both the letter and the spirit of the segregation laws. We had to comply with some of the laws or else face harsh penalties. I am quite happy that we did the right thing and managed to navigate a safe and sensible path. But it opens up the dilemma of making a value decision on the quality of the law and deciding what is the spirit of the law.

Each time this reading comes up (Mt22.15-22), I am faced with a moral challenge. As an accountant, my brief is to minimise the tax payable for the client while staying within the boundaries of the law. I am sure Mr Sunak interprets the spirit of the tax laws in quite a different light from me.

I enjoyed your piece, but not sure it gets me anywhere closer to finding peace of mind with the issue."

I replied

John, thank you so much for this thoughtful email.

The years of Apartheid clearly presented a relentless, exhausting dilemma which illustrates well the tension between (it occurs to me) honouring truth and honouring principle, i.e. the truth when it is being distorted by the authorities and the principle of obeying the authorities.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer helps. When the authorities perpetrate lies about God and exploit their power, then a line has been crossed. Thomas More found this with Henry VIII, and eventually had to say there is a line in the sand.

The whistle-blower faces the same dilemma, e.g. Snowden or Assange. When has the line been crossed? Jeremiah and early Isaiah, Hosea and Amos all faced the same issue. How to reprove the authorities whilst supporting them? But I observe they also enjoyed clear guidance and Call.

As for the accountant's dilemma, I think I understand. The client expects you to push the letter of the law as far as possible without regard to the spirit of the law. I suppose you cannot live the client's holiness for him, so it is his/her conscience that is important. But I suppose also there is a line somewhere where the accountant could say "I won't do that." And there may be the cost of losing a client – not quite as dire as losing your head.

I don't think the dilemma goes away. We are in the world but not of the world. We are salt and light and yeast, but not the ingredients (if you follow me).

John replied

Thanks for the email and the phone call earlier today. Quite happy for you to use my reference to South Africa in any further musings. Although I was detained by police for opposition to the laws of the day, I felt I could be more usefully employed in helping others less fortunate than me to avoid some of the harshness of the laws. Could we have done more? I am sure we could, but it is a difficult juggle to keep within the law, whilst still "bending" it where possible.

The tax issue is a walk in the park by comparison. The really tough issues facing so many others in the world today living in countries where the rule of law is questionable.

I think your musing helped to re-focus my moral compass, and for that I thank you.

John's last sentence is a fine ending, and I am loath to have the last word. However, this from Jesus comes to mind: (Matthew 10:19,20)

"When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

I think the principle we take from this is that there is an inner voice beyond conscience which guides us. Our quest for holiness includes listening to the 'Spirit of our Father' guiding us. May our inner ears stay open. Amen.