

Matthew's weekly musing, 16th October 2020



I've been taken by surprise by the famous gospel saying. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

The surprise came when I asked myself what the implication was for me today. Some musing led me to the answer you'll find near the end. But first a prelude.

The gospel of Matthew shows us that, between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday, Jesus is engaged in trenchant dispute with the élite of Jerusalem. In the parables of chapters 20 & 21, we find Jesus in the rôle of son of a vineyard owner, of a feast holder, as cornerstone of an arch. In each parable the son is rejected. In each parable it is the Pharisees who reject the son.

In Matthew 22 the élite are on the offensive. We find the Pharisees and Herodians overcoming their long time hostility to each other and uniting to challenge Jesus. This unprecedented alliance sought to give Jesus an impossible choice. Here it is:

Matthew 22

- 15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.
16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"
18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.
20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"
21 They answered, "Caesar's."
Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are the Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."
22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The choice was between loyalty to God and loyalty to the invader. Jesus simply rejected the choice and indicated that both should be honoured.

What did 'giving to God' mean? It meant the temple taxes for maintaining the building, care for the widow (needy), orphan, sojourner (refugee), oh and the priestly cast.

'Giving to Caesar' meant the taxes that enriched the invader and also paid for practicalities like roads and public safety. This tax to the Romans was threefold; a grain and olive oil tax of 10%; a poll tax of a day's wage; income tax of 1%.

So to return to my question: what has all this to do with us? Well it seems that we are given two challenges

1. We are invited to give to God, and this is interpreted as to the church for mission locally, nationally, internationally; for employees; for buildings; for the privilege of having a voice in high places. *NB we clergy are not paid for by the state. The historic resources of the church are essentially my pension scheme - so hands off!*
2. We are invited to pay our dues to the Caesar of today, i.e. our Government. Government has responsibility for education, health service, defence, police, law, infrastructure and so on.

But the real challenge to me is devotional. Paul helps us with this when he builds on Jesus's teaching:

Romans 13

- | |
|---|
| <p>1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.</p> <p>6 For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing.</p> |
|---|

So '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.

I look forward to my postbag this week!