Sermon

‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s;

and to God the things that are God’s’

22 October 2017

‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s’. These famous words describe the relation between church and state. Of the relation between church and state, in the world of God. If not in detail, then in principle. Beyond principle, however, our Gospel this morning is performative act.

The text begins with the Pharisees’ plot, that would seek to rig the conversation with Jesus. They send some of their young guns, along with some Herodians, first to flatter, then to test Jesus with their question ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’

The question is a difficult one, as the makeup of the crowd reveals. For many, payment of the Roman poll tax is an act of treason. For them, the mere handling of a coin with Caesar’s image on it is offensive. If Jesus says yes, he will be in trouble with them. On the other hand, if Jesus says no, he is guilty of treason, with the Herodians on hand ready to put him on trial. They are world seeking to undermine him, to usurp his authority. His authority as one with God himself. Under the ever present worldly sway of temptation, the protagonists want to play God.

Asking for a coin, Jesus has them tell him whose head is on it, and says ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s’. With one sentence - not only is the explosive situation disarmed by Jesus, but the tables are turned. Those who had planned to put one man on trial, discover themselves, to their complete surprise, on trial, by that one man.

One with God, he is judging the world. By turning the question back on them. Who are you going to worship? The empire? Or God?

In his earthly life, Jesus exercised judgement on every form of power that had become corrupt. That had come to imagine themselves, to be one with God. That had come to exercise power in a way that left no room for God, that claimed a final authority over their human subjects. That had forgotten that they stand at the mercy, of the salvation, and the judgment of God.

In the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus turned the tables on the corruption of power in the temple in Jerusalem. In the gospel this morning, Jesus turned the tables on the corruption of power by the Emperor. A prefiguring, a foretaste, of Jesus' final judgment of the world, both Jew, and Gentile, in his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven to reign over the world already now, with the authority of God himself.

Our Gospel this morning does not define the Christian doctrine of church and state, though it alludes to it. It must never be used nor to ascribe to Caesar an equality with God. Nor must it ever be used to banish religion from the public square – and so grant the political realm ultimate allegiance over the human being. God will not permit his relegation only to another realm, irrelevant to the political order. While the coin may bear the image, the icon of Caesar, and belongs to Caesar, the human being bears the image, the icon, of God. And so wherever the human being may live and operate – whether in the social,

economic, political, or religious realm – they belong to God. Their ultimate loyalty does not change between the church and the voting booth.

The text is no panacea to the problem of church and state. It does not answer the many lingering issues that confront the church in its relation to the ongoing political order of the world. But it does set straight what are to be our priorities. Where our final allegiances are to be. There is the penultimate, and there is the ultimate. The kingdom of the world, and the kingdom of God. The texts is not iconoclastic regarding political government. There is a place for the political order. But that place is only ever penultimate. It must never be allowed to become, the ultimate.

By the necessary distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate, the ongoing political order is given certain conditions. The human being, every human being, belongs to God. Created in the divine image, and destined for that image, they belong to God alone. And by this, the Gospel of Jesus Christ operates subversively in every human context in which governments act as if citizens have no higher commitments than to the state. Whether in the ancient world of Caesar, or the modern world of secularism, Christianity must then stand in an essentially critical relation to the political order. For when that image of God is denied, and people become less than fully human, then the message of Jesus will carry a revolutionary word, a word that need be spoken, to both oppressed, and oppressor.

The Lord be with you