

St Peter's Ealing
Sunday 19th October 2014
Trinity 18 YrA

Give unto the Emperor...

Today's Gospel reading is a familiar story from scripture, often quoted but not always understood. I remember, when a snotty curate, having a discussion with a young, politically active member of the church choir in the parish where I was serving. It was in the days of the Poll Tax protests and he was advocating the paying of the tax, which of course I was not. And in the midst of it he came out with the phrase, "give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor" and I finished off with "and to God what belongs to God". I was never quite sure who won the discussion. I suspect neither of us really. We had sort of misused scripture against each other and never really thought about the implications of the phrase.

We are called as Christians to be law abiding citizens, to give to the powers that be what is theirs by right in the eyes of society and the law. But what if you think the authorities are wrong. What do you do then? The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasises this point when he tells his reader to submit to the authorities (Hebrews 13.17) in all things. Paul often refers to slaves obeying their masters (e.g. Ephesians 6.5f) which to the modern ear is very difficult indeed. And in Romans 13.1-7 Paul is clear on the status of a Christian to the ruling authorities. What is the Christian to do then when the ways of the political leadership goes counter to the teachings of Jesus? In Paul it is the example of the Christian that will change the will of the master. What is important for Hebrews is the Christian witness to the authorities of the love of God. Was then my sparring partner right in following the ways of the law? Was his Christian witness of obeying following the teachings of Jesus? Possibly.

Giving to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor is not that easy I would suggest. Caring for the poor, standing up against injustice, making peaceful protest are all bona fide Christian responses to the 'emperors' of today as we proclaim the love of God in the world. When the needs of the downtrodden are ignored it is also the responsibility of the Christian to speak out. It is the how that speaking out is done that determines its Christian nature.

But what about giving to God what belongs to God? What is it we are giving? People, time and talents?

The story of the discussion in Matthew's Gospel is given heightened drama as Jesus asks for a denarii. He is in the temple confines where only holy things should be and

yet these holy men have a Roman coin with a pagan symbol on it, both not allowed. The hypocrisy of the situation would not have been lost on our early reader. But Jesus takes this token and points out it has an image and an inscription. The image and inscription embossed upon it suggest who owns it and who should have it back. The implication of this then is to ask whose image we carry? Genesis 1.27 says we are made in the image of God. The implications of Jesus' words is that we should give ourselves to God.

Jesus is re-establishing this close relationship with God. That we are God's people and we belong to God. This belonging status changes though in the person of Jesus. Initially belonging suggests a sort of possessing. Such as an item belonging to a person. The place of Jesus in the story of our salvation suggests that there is more to our relationship with God than that. We are not just possessions like that coin, or a coat or a staff to be given back when requested. Belonging to God is about giving of ourselves, serving God not in duty but in love. In belonging to God our relationship with the rest of the world and the understanding of our place within the world changes. In belonging to God in this new sense of giving God becomes the meaning of our existence. God is no longer an intellectual discussion point to be argued about over the dinner table. He becomes a reality in our lives and gives us meaning and purpose. In this we want to know when we can serve God, how we can serve God. It is a very real experience in our lives.

It is this challenge Jesus' listeners were amazed by. His challengers had been making an intellectual argument about the Torah. Jesus was making a point about their relationship with God. As with all of Jesus' teaching these words come down to us today and ask of us the same question. We realise this question can be broadened into every aspect of our lives and maybe turned around to ask the question, "What do *you* give to God?" Do we make the mistake of the Pharisees and make a convenience of God and respond to him when it is convenient to us or do realise this relationship with God, made new in the person of Jesus who gave himself for us that we might know God's love and live by it; offering to God our brokenness and looking to him for healing and wholeness.

The Pharisees, realising what Jesus was saying to them walked away. What will you do?