

Sermon Notes for Trinity 23

render unto Caesar (Gospel)

The question of tribute to Caesar is in all three Synoptic gospels and in very similar words, so we may conclude that Mark was the only written source and there was no rival account. The incident happened and was important enough to recall. Presumably, then, it was thought of permanent application, at least for those few years before the writing of the gospels secured its survival.

At one level, it is undoubtedly a study in hypocrisy. That concept is introduced in all three accounts. By the mere fact of having coin of the realm in your possession, you demonstrate that you accept the regime for practical purposes. Then how can *you* suggest that it might be legitimate to refuse the regime for practical purposes? As an *ad hominem*, it works. But is it more than that?

The revival of a Jewish currency under the Maccabees had been a matter of celebration; and apart from the temple currency (not in use for secular purposes) it had been lost. It might well therefore be thought common ground in the debate that the Roman currency is distasteful, that it would be better if a Jewish currency could be restored. But to refuse to pay Roman taxes is to revolt. So the question implied is whether revolt is a religious obligation. A possible version of this, given the involvement of the “Herodians”, is whether, if Herod revolts and declares himself King of the Jews, you will enlist on his side. But the simpler version is that the question tries to trap Jesus. Answer yes and he is a collaborator; answer no and he is a rebel. Either way, he might be eliminated.

Most Jews had for many centuries lived under alien regimes and had not seen a problem in it. Galilee was a frontier area where Jewish independence had been a brief recent experience, and only a few miles away were Greek cities where Jewish independence had not been known since the exile. But the apparent location of the debate is nearer Jerusalem, where there had been a longer experience of a Jewish state. Perhaps there is the hope that Jesus will answer no because it is for him as king to issue currency. (I doubt that there were any clear ideas about what an Anointed One (Messiah) would do; the Maccabean precedent is about a High Priest (which Jesus could not be because he is from the wrong tribe) rather than a king, though the two roles were for a time merged.) If so, he is being tempted into a worldly kingship. The gospel of John makes the point in its own way “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight”. It is a category mistake to aspire to a Christian kingdom of this world, and we are well rid of the error.

Now the *ad hominem* is usable against us. We too use the secular currency with its image and superscription, though nobody even pretends that the sovereign is divine. The universal ruling in the New Testament is that we are to pay taxes. The Quakers resisted; they were wrong. If taxes are abused by secular rulers, that is their guilt. Yet “our citizenship is in heaven”; the state is not ours.

But of course the answer does not end there. “Unto God the things that are God's.” This might seem a platitude. Others have suggested that this is a subtle reintroduction of the subversion. For everything is due to God, so there is nothing left for Caesar. But of course that subversive idea is not expressed, so there is nothing for the questioners to denounce. Others see it as a rebuke – that the questioners not only accept the regime for practical purposes but also fail in their religious duties (a challenge particularly against the Pharisees, whose whole approach is to make appropriate distinctions in this matter). In other words, you query the lesser and forget the greater task.

How does this apply to us? It is all too easy to live a worldly life most of the week and discharge a “religious duty” for a brief period on Sunday – or even daily. I accuse myself of this with more certainty than anybody else; we must each examine our own conscience. This is not solved by increasing the time given to “religious” duties, which may fairly be called the solution of the Pharisees. God wants our entire life all of the time, which (except for a few monks) means that he wants our unavoidable worldly life to be conducted on his terms and not those of the secular system. There are distinctively Christian duties such as prayer and worship, and these must be performed, but the most useful point to remember is that Christianity is a full-time job.

“What numberless perplexities, and difficulties, and dangers shall we escape by having our conversation in Heaven; and thereby making God, as the Collect says, “our refuge and strength”? But how can we expect that Heaven should be our portion hereafter, unless our heart and our treasure are there now?” (Williams)