

10.22.23 What Belongs to God – Have Your Priorities Straight Matthew 22.15-22

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When Jill and I were in Ireland in September, one of the places we visited was Kylemore Abbey in Connemara, County Galway (**show photos**). It's a beautiful place. What's now an Abbey began in the 1860s as a romantic gift before becoming home to a Benedictine Community of nuns in 1920 who fled Belgium during World War I. The nuns opened an international boarding school and established a day school for local girls.

The estate was first owned by a very successful and generous couple, Mitchell Henry, and his wife Margaret. They looked out for the people in the surrounding area and provided jobs for close to 300 people. In addition to an estate house, there's a walled Victorian garden and a small neogothic cathedral that Mitchell had built as a loving tribute to his wonderful wife who tragically took ill and died while they were on a trip in Egypt. The most famous visitors to Kylemore were England's King Edward VII, Queen Alexandria, and Princess Victoria, who visited in 1903. We heard on a tour about all the work and preparation that was done for the visit by the king and queen.

How do you prepare for a visit by the king? Very diligently, thoroughly, and generously. Having a king coming to your home re-shapes and re-orientes your priorities and how you spend your energy, time, and resources.

I share that story with you because our scriptures for the next four weeks come from the 22nd to the 25th chapters of Matthew. The teaching of Jesus in these chapters comes after Palm Sunday and before his betrayal and arrest on Thursday. It's in these few final days in Jerusalem that Jesus shares the last vital teaching he can with his disciples and part of that is focused on how you prepare for the return of the king.

On Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem and is hailed by the crowds as *"the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee"* (Matthew 21:11). Then Jesus drives out all who are buying and selling in the temple, overturning tables, and making those in positions of religious authority angry (Matthew 21:15). Then he heals some people. On Monday, Jesus enters the temple again and the chief priests and elders question who gave him the authority to do what he's doing (Matthew 21:23). Like a typical rabbi, Jesus answers their question with a question, at that moment a question about John the Baptist which they refuse to answer. Then Jesus proceeds to tell three parables: about a man who

had two sons, a landowner who planted a vineyard, and a marriage feast, all of which condemn the actions of those in positions of religious authority. They recognize this and want to arrest him (Matthew 21:46).

These scenes of escalating conflict in chapters 21 and 22 of Matthew are between Jesus and his critics from three different groups: the Sadducees, Herodians, and Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in the possibility of resurrection. The Herodians, in order to reap the benefits of being close to power, aligned themselves with the ruler Herod Antipas who was a puppet of Rome, the occupying force. The Pharisees advocated faithful and strict obedience to the Law of Moses. None of these groups were happy with Jesus. Representatives from two of the groups, the Pharisees and Herodians, plot to trap Jesus by getting him to say something that will get him in trouble with the governing Roman authorities or his followers or both.

The question they ask Jesus reveals that debates about the role of faith and politics are not new. In today's gospel when people want to get Jesus in trouble, they ask him his position on an issue involving politics and taxes in order to trap him in what he said so they could use it against him. **Listen to Matthew 22:15-22,**

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 the emperor, 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, *"The emperor's."* Then he said to them, *"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor'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 Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this confrontation. Whenever people question Jesus from a place of malice or insincerity, it never goes well for them. Jesus was happy to answer questions that came from a place of seeking and wanting to learn, for example, the young man who comes to him with questions in

Matthew 19:16-22, even if the questioner finds Jesus' answer difficult. It's ironic that Jesus's opponents say, *"we know that you are sincere,"* when they're **not** being sincere. Yet, what they say about Jesus in verse 16 is 100% accurate. Jesus is sincere and teaches the way of God in accordance with truth, shows deference to no one; and doesn't regard people with partiality.

Jesus' opponents were angry about what he'd done and said as recorded in Matthew 21 and 22. He'd disrupted business as usual in the Temple, he'd acted with authority they hadn't given him. He told parables that condemned their behavior and choices regarding his ministry, presence, and teaching. They were hoping he'd say something that would get him in trouble with the Romans. If he answered, *"No, don't pay the tax to the heathen occupiers!"* He would've been arrested and charged with treason. If he said, *"Yes, pay the tax that is due,"* he risked losing the sympathy of his Jewish supporters if he seemed to support the Roman occupation by insisting on paying taxes to foreigners who had taken away their freedom and autonomy. Doing so with a coin, a denarius, **(show photo of coin)** that bore the image and inscription of the emperor: *"Tiberias Caesar son of the divine Augustus"* was also an affront to God and a violation of the second commandment.

The Herodians represent those who cooperated with the Roman regime in order to benefit in terms of jobs, power, money, and influence. They support paying the tax. The Pharisees were more popular with the people because in principle they resented and resisted the tax, but they did not go as far as the Zealots who publicly resisted paying the tax. The specific tax in question was the census tax instituted in 6 AD when Judea became a Roman province. The tax, which could only be paid in Roman coin, played a key role in triggering a disastrous uprising in the years 66-70 AD during which Jerusalem was invaded and almost completely destroyed by the Romans.

So, can you picture the scene? Jesus, the Herodians, and the Pharisees standing in the sacred precinct of the Temple, the Pharisees asking their profoundly political question, phrased in religious terms, and then bringing a Roman coin with its idolatrous image of the Emperor **(photo of a denarius again)**. Jesus' answer *"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's"* acknowledges there are responsibilities we have toward the government that

need to be met. At the same time, the kingdom of God Jesus represents and announces is a higher priority, a higher calling and it touches all of your life. For Jesus, there's no distinction between "sacred" and "secular" but there is a hierarchy of what's to be our highest priority.

How does your faith influence your priorities in terms of the daily and weekly choices you make as far as how you spend your time, what you read or listen to, how you allocate your resources, where you devote your energy, and how you treat and regard other people?

It's important that we have our priorities in the proper order, for example, that our faith shapes our political beliefs, rather than our politics shaping our faith. Our faith shapes our views on issues and helps determine what issues are important to us. And we're to talk and write and share about these things always with Christlike humility, grace, and kindness, not with contempt, arrogance, or condescension. Our faith shapes our economics – how we earn a living, conduct our business, how much we live on, and how much we give away. For devoted followers of Jesus, no aspect of our lives and our priorities will be untouched by his influence and leadership.

Jesus' tells the Pharisees and Herodians that people are to pay the tax. We also know from Matthew 17:24-27 that Jesus paid taxes. Paul in Romans 13:1-8 and Peter in 1 Peter 2:13-17 also take this view of supporting and obeying those in positions of governmental or political authority and paying whatever is due in terms of taxes, honor, and respect. Jesus wasn't looking to overthrow the Roman government or to foment a political coup or uprising. He wasn't seeking to build a political movement or to use the government to accomplish God's work. He was saying, "the emperor has his realm, and I have mine." Jesus was interested in what belongs to God and what is that? First, of all people. People were Jesus' priority. Jesus wanted people to be free to follow him in loving and serving God and God's people. Respect and honor were to be given to the political ruler. Worship, fear, reverence, and offering our whole selves in gratitude for all God has done – these belong to God alone. That's the distinction Jesus, Paul, and Peter all make. Jesus turned a question that was intended as a political trap into a powerful statement about the supreme authority of God. To give to a political leader what's due to God alone is to be guilty of idolatry.

What you believe about God, the law, politics, and government is shaped by where and when you live. For example, when we benefit from the government because it protects us and our freedoms, provides services like national parks, interstate highways, and national defense, and agrees with our worldview, we tend to see government positively. The Apostle Paul's view of governing authorities as expressed in Romans 13:1-7 reflects the fact that he enjoys Roman citizenship with all the rights and privileges that went with it. Since Paul benefited from his citizenship he could say, *"There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."* However, we wouldn't have a nation if the Continental Congress had followed those verses in the 1770's because they wouldn't have resisted the authority of King George III of England.

In the Bible, one finds a position about the Roman Government that's different than Paul's and that is John's view in Revelation. John's view of the governing authorities under Emperor Domitian in a time of great hardship and persecution for followers of Christ is quite negative. Revelation 13 pictures the state as a beast opposed to God's purposes. Revelation 18 speaks of the downfall of any nation which becomes a modern Babylon, corrupted by its wealth, materialism, and injustice. When we're persecuted or harmed by the government, we're less likely to see it as the instrument of God. Certainly, Christians living under a brutal dictator such as Stalin in Russia or Hitler in Germany or Christians in Myanmar or Iran right now would be more inclined to agree with John's view of the government than with Paul's. The same people who have a high view of a president's or government's authority in the US, might have a very different belief if they were living in Russia or North Korea. There are also times as we saw in the Civil Rights movement, when people motivated by faith engage in peaceful, non-violent civil disobedience in order to confront unjust laws. Some Christians in the United States seem to flip back and forth from Paul's view to John's depending on whether the occupant of the White House is from the party they support or not.

Many of us are disappointed, disillusioned, and even fearful because of how politics is practiced today in our country with the outsized influence of money, the lack of genuine dialogue on important policy issues that truly impact our present and our future,

the absence of civility in discussion and speech, the name calling and contempt toward those who disagree with one's position, and the lack of commitment to a well-functioning government that solves problems and meets human and national needs. It's critically important for our civic and national life that Christians be informed and involved citizens in our communities, states, and in the nation as a whole. In our church are followers of Jesus who hold different views on a variety of policy issues. What's important is that our faith informs our politics and not the other way around and that we act like genuine followers of Christ at all times. The teaching of Jesus, as we can best understand it from a thorough and prayerful reading of the gospels, should inform our worldview and how we live our life, including our politics and everything else.

I want to close with a final look at how Jesus' opponents responded to his answer to their question. Matthew says they were amazed by Jesus' answer, but they simply left him and went away without any further engagement or words of change or commitment (22:22). Throughout Matthew's Gospel this is what happens. Some people have an encounter with Jesus, they hear him teach, they witness or experience Jesus healing, they see how he treats children, women, lepers, and those who aren't in their right mind, and they just walk away unchanged, unmoved, unwilling to re-order their life and priorities to align with those of Jesus and the kingdom he demonstrates and proclaims. Don't be that person. Be like Matthew. Be willing to take a chance and to follow Jesus, Be willing to let Jesus reshape and transform your life. You'll never regret making that choice.

From Matthew's perspective, the goal of life is not merely to defeat the empire but to follow Jesus in loving people, including enemies, striving after God's kingdom and righteousness, and living in hope between now and the future when the king returns.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. In Matthew 22:18, there is malicious intent behind the question posed to Jesus by the Pharisees and Herodians. Why do you think they were trying to trap Jesus? How did they hope he'd answer?

2. What does Jesus mean when he says: *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* How do you discern what belongs to God and what belongs to “the emperor” or “Caesar?”
3. How does your faith influence your priorities in terms of the daily and weekly choices you make as far as how you spend your time, what you read or listen to, how you allocate your resources, where you devote your energy, and how you treat and regard other people?
4. 1 Peter 2:17 states, *“Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”* How do we do each of those things? What would it look like for you and us to honor everyone and to love the family of believers?
5. How would you describe the relationship between fearing God and honoring the supreme political leader?
6. How do we make sure our faith informs our politics rather than our politics shaping our faith? Can you clearly support and connect your political views with the teaching and ministry of Jesus?