

Pentecost 20
18/10/2020

Mark the Evangelist

2 Corinthians 3:17-4:7

Psalm 99

Matthew 22:15-22

Faith between gods and emperors

In a sentence

Life in this world – our decisions and actions – are in themselves uncertain; it is God who makes us right

‘Render to Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and to God the things which are God’s.’

Ever since this almost throw-away line from Jesus, hares have been running everywhere concerning the relationship between the affairs of the world and the affairs of heaven. Those with power in the affairs of the world have typically wanted to remind the church that Jesus drew a line between God and the world and our responsibilities to each. Those with a sense that God would see the political world changed have often had to convince even the church that faith can ‘interfere’ – so to speak – in the business of the world.

The energy in those debates comes from a separation Jesus himself at least *seems* to make. Yet the original question is not about the separation of church and state (as we put it), and so neither could Jesus’ answer be. To pose a separation of the political sphere, the market and the religious cult was not something Israel could do. The prophets preached that allegiance to God is at the heart of the life of the nation, and was to be manifest in the palace, the people and the Temple.

The Pharisees don’t ask about the relationship of the political sphere and the religious sphere but about the relationship between a foreign power and the religion wrapped around it (on the one hand), and their own (subjugated) politics and religion (on the other).

The separation we too easily hear as being along the secular-religious line is, then, actually a question about how these gods and their respective politics interact. Can we know where God is in our complex personal, social, political and religious being, and so can we know what we must do when our convictions are in conflict with our context?

We would have to say that while those challengers went away ‘amazed’ at Jesus’ response, they weren’t any the wiser as to precisely *where* the ‘things of Caesar’ or the ‘things of God’ have their beginning and their end. We are left still asking ‘How much is enough?’ and ‘How much is too much?’

Yet this way of putting it reveals a concern hidden below the surface question of God versus Caesar. The Pharisees’ question really asks, What are the rules here and what do we have to do to keep ourselves safe *from God*? This is a concern with *self-justification* before God and before the world.

Jesus, however, refuses to give an answer which affirms this concern. This is because such an answer would violate the peculiar responsibility we have before each other and before God, and the dependence of those relationships on grace.

While it looks, then, as if Jesus dodges an undodgeable bullet with his own trick question about the head on the coin, a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to the Pharisees would have been not so much politically dangerous as catastrophic for faith. For faith indeed trusts in God but cannot show precisely *where God is*, and so cannot prove what God desires in any time or place. Jesus’ answer then, with its lack of clarity as to just where the things of God and the things of the emperor start and finish, could be re-expressed as, ‘Live dangerously – take the risk of making a decision here’.

This moves us from the specific question of God and Caesar to a more general question of how we can know whether our choices and actions are correct, and presses us away from considering this text in isolation from the gospel as a whole – as it is usually considered – towards that wider gospel perspective.

At the heart of the gospel story is the crucifixion of Jesus, and this is also at the heart of how we should read our text today. For a deep irony is revealed in the crucifixion when we look back from it to the challenge the Pharisees put to Jesus in today’s reading. If the religious leaders wanted to know how to *separate* God and Caesar, in the crucifixion they *unite* God and Caesar in a single offering. The crucifixion is precisely a ‘rendering to God’ in the form of a ‘rendering’ to Caesar. Jesus is arrested, tried and presented to the imperial power for *Godly* reasons – so far as the religious authorities understand God. Jesus is a blasphemer and is handed over to be destroyed, *for God’s sake*. This destruction, however, is brought about by giving Jesus to the Romans, for the religious leaders have no authority to make such an offering to God. The death of Jesus is a rendering of him up to *God* by giving him up to the *emperor*.

The religious authorities, then, with their proposal that righteousness would *separate* God and Caesar, *combine* them to bring about the desired end of Jesus in a kind of ‘unGodly Godliness’.

And yet there is that other ‘rendering’ here – that which Jesus himself makes – also a two-in-one giving to God and to Caesar. On the one hand, Jesus’ life is given up to God: everything he does is from and to God. On the other hand, this is done within an ordinary historical context with its particular empire of needs, desires and powers. So the incarnation itself – the presence of the kingdom of God in a manger or on the dusty roads of Palestine – is an offering to God *in the form of* a baby in the hay or those roads and all who travel them. Jesus gives to God in the ways and means that are possible to him in that time and place.

Jesus’ unswerving path to the cross, then, is an offering to God in the form of the religious convictions and political powers of the day. It is, we might say, a ‘Godly unGodliness’, the reverse of what the religious authorities have done. Yet the Godly and the unGodly are so thoroughly intertwined that no one can see that the cross is righteous – that it *is* Godly – because there is no formula in which ‘die on a cross’ equals ‘righteousness’.

Jesus’ offering to God is a life lived in the midst of a world with its many gods and many caesars, within which it is never possible to *prove* how much the god should get and how much the world should get. And yet his particular performance of that life is declared by the resurrection to be righteous – not because at every point along the way

Jesus did exactly the thing God was looking for but because everything was done *trusting in the God who makes things right*.

Or, to put it differently, to believe in the resurrection of Jesus is to live before God in the world, believing that God has put you here for a reason and trusting that God will declare your earnest response righteous.

The Pharisees' dangerous question is not really about Gods and emperors. It is about how where righteousness is to be found when we must act, unable to prove to others that this is the right course of action. This is at the heart of any tough decision we have to make.

Our political leaders today are in the midst of this as they wonder when to relax the Covid-19 lockdown, balancing the desire to minimize its impact on life and health with the need for social and economic re-wakening. They – and we – will not know they have done the *best* thing but only that they have responded in a particular way to that gloriously ambiguous command, 'Love one another'.

We will not know that we have made the most 'faithful' response to the anticipated rise in global temperatures over the next century – despite the eternal confidence of opposition parties that they *do* know. We will know only that we made *a* response, and God have mercy on us.

We will not know that we have donated *enough* money, spent enough time, been patient long enough; we will know only that we have given, spent, waited some...

How then, can we act under these circumstances? *Is* it faithful to pay 'unGodly' taxes? Can we protect ourselves against God in this way?

The gospel is that God knows that we cannot know, even as we beat ourselves up with the thought that we *should* know or assure ourselves that we *do*. God knows that there is no 'protection' from God in this way.

If God knows this, then God's call to life is, 'Live dangerously, take the risk of making a decision here', for God knows that there are no guarantees in this world other than God himself. So God is OK with what we do as we seek to live a Godly life, peppered with prayers for mercy.

God's knowledge of us and continuing love for us nonetheless is our freedom to give to God what is God's and to the world what is the world's, in everything that we do.

Those who love and serve God as God loves and serve them are free to do what they will.
