

## **Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost. Matthew 22 15-33.**

There is a saying:

Knowledge is recognising that tomato is a fruit.

Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.

We like categorising things and once we have them in that basket they are supposed to stay there. We like being able to say 'this belongs here and that belongs there'. At school, in maths and biology and various other subjects there were the overlapping circles of categories, Venn diagrams, where some of what was being observed belonged here, some belonged there, but some things belonged in both of two different categories. Even then we like to know what belongs where.

The world seems a simpler place when black is black and white is white. The world seems a simpler place when we can say 'this sort of activity or perspective is over here, and it belongs there', and a different perspective is actually in opposition to that. Anyone who says that science and religion are opposites is making that sort of simplistic and unhelpful judgement. It makes for more dramatic books, movies and arguments to try to say that science and religion are opposites but they are not. They are both ways of approaching the observable world and attempting to make sense of our experience as humanity.

Religious understanding and expression does change as we learn more about our world and ourselves and, through our individual and shared experiences, about God. Scientific knowledge and theories based on the available data are also constantly being updated and adapted. The overlap is significant, so long as we have the humility to be open to continue to learn.

Another dichotomy which the world around us likes to draw is between politics and religion. There are some within the Church who say that we should never be involved in politics, though to say that they have to ignore large chunks of the life story of Jesus. There are many around us in society who object to any comment from the Church on politics. Labor AND Liberal governments, though more so Liberal, have threatened and bullied parts of the church which have called for fairer, more compassionate, more just policies in relation to the underprivileged in our society, refugees, overseas aid. Some people around us outside the Church would deny our right to comment at all on changes in social policy affecting members of the community in which we live.

Calling on the society in which we live, and the elected and appointed leaders of our society, to act with justice, to be merciful and to have humility rather than arrogance is a prophetic role which is part of our DNA as the people of God. Politics is about human behaviour, the ordering of society, the choices made about the application of resources in our society. In all of these areas we have a perspective to offer which comes from the values inspired by God's call for what makes for a better community.

I do agree, though, that when we enter into the political debates we need to be deeply aware of what is driving our comments, what is motivating us. We can be just as blinkered as anyone by cultural baggage cloaked in tradition or 'the way things have been'. Humility is a vital characteristic to hold.

Jesus got caught up in that sort of debate, as we saw in today's Gospel reading (Matthew 22:15-33). The people of the Holy Land in Jesus' time were under Roman rule and they didn't like it. But the religious leaders attacking and trying to trick Jesus today tried to use that situation to provoke Jesus into saying something they could use against him. On the surface the response from Jesus sounds like he is drawing a line between categories of responsibility: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's."

Separation of church and state. Very clear. Or is it? On one side Jesus was saying 'you use Roman coins, you engage in commerce with the Roman occupying force, it is a choice or a reality of life. Live with it. Deal with it.'

What about his comment to render to God the things that are God's? Was he referring to the other coins that they all had in their pockets? Temple taxes, payments for sacrifices, contributions to the temple ... all these needed to be made using special coins. At the entrance of the temple there were people who changed the Roman coins for the Jewish coins, and in the process often ripped off the people who just wanted to pay what was expected. You will remember what Jesus did to the tables of those money-changers.

But I don't think Jesus was following his comment about the Roman coins with a comment about Jewish coins. "Give to God the things that are God's." What did Jesus mean by that. I think that his opponents were not just struck with admiration because Jesus managed to get out of the trap they tried to set. They were struck by what He was teaching.

Think about those circles of things being in different categories. the things that are Caesars, the things that might be connected to the relationship with the government, that might be a relatively easily defined part of life. What about the things that are God's. Where are the boundaries on that?

You could ask the question in the reverse. Where in the world is God NOT present? What is it that is NOT part of our connection with God? What can we say is somehow completely separate from God? Is there anything? We would say, of course not.

As we were reminded recently when reading about Moses in front of the burning bush, God who we meet here is the one who IS, 'I am who I am'. God is. And God is involved in and connected to every part of our lives. God is the whole area and all the possible circles of categories of other aspects of our lives are subsets of that whole.

So, other parts of life need to be acknowledged and dealt with. But the part of our life where God is ... that overlaps with everything. And that makes a difference to how we engage with all those circles. The people of Jesus' time were grumpy and rebellious towards the Roman occupiers. BUT because the connection with God is not a separate thing but infuses everything, what Jesus was also saying is that the way of relating to the occupying force needed to be informed and guided by their relationship with God.

People who like life to be compartmentalised don't like that reminder. It may seem easy to cheat and to act in ways that are questionable towards someone who we don't like, or a government with which we disagree, or in situations where we can try to explain away questionable behaviour. But rendering to God the things that are God's ... that means that the knowledge we have of God's love and God's call to compassion, mercy, justice, integrity, hope, respect, and the passion for life and for care for the vulnerable and weak ... these values are to infuse ALL of our living. No barriers.

Think about what we do when we don't take this to heart. What does it do to our hearts, our faith, our relationship with God? It can lead to a way of living where God gets what is left over of our time and our money and our attention once we have dealt with all the other things that can consume us.

The people who challenged Jesus threw a curly question at him. His answer curled back and took the challenge to faithful living to a deeper level, for them and for us. Fulfil our responsibilities to those who are present in various aspects of our lives. And fulfil the call on our lives by God in every aspect.

Amen.

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