

Matthew 22: 15-22 Paying Taxes to Ceaser (Politics)

Nick Clegg's wife Miriam suddenly dies in a tragic accident and goes to Heaven where she meets St. Peter. She notices that there are clocks everywhere. She asks St. Peter "why are there so many clocks here?" St. Peter tells her that each clock represents a person on earth and that every time a person tells a lie, the clock ticks off one second.

St. Peter explains that the one clock has never moved because it belonged to mother Theresa and she never told a lie in her whole life. The next clock belonged to Gandhi and since he only ever told two lies in his whole life, only two seconds had clicked by.

Miriam asks, "So where is Nick's clock?" Ah, St. Peter says, "Nick's clock has a very special place, upstairs in Jesus' office..... He's using it as a ceiling fan."

Intro

In our gospel reading today we get a unique insight into some of the politics around in Jesus' time. The Pharisees despised the Herodians and with good reason. Like their namesake, Herod, the Herodians cooperated with the Roman occupiers and oppressors, and they often placed their politics before any loyalty to their faith.

The Pharisees on the other hand, were not advocates of any kind of violent revolution, but they were totally loyal to Judaism and God.

So, it must have come as a total surprise to Jesus to see both the Pharisees and Herodians coming together to him to ask him a question, a question which was politically loaded. "Teacher, we know that you tell the truth. You teach the truth about God's will for people, without worrying about what others think, because you pay no attention to any one's status." I guess with those words of flattery from his enemies, Jesus would have been immediately on his guard. Then after those few kind words, came the punch line: "Is it against our law to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, or not?"

The law, they were referring to was of course Jewish law, the Torah. If Jesus had replied saying that a good Jew should support the Roman state, then he would have allied himself with a power that was occupying Israel and killing Jews. But if Jesus had said, Jews should not pay taxes to Rome then that would have been regarded as treason. Either way, this question was the perfect trap to lure Jesus into.

Politics

How many times have we heard people say that religion and politics shouldn't mix? For example, back in the days of South African apartheid the President P.W Botha warned Archbishop Desmond Tutu "against distorting 'the true message of Christ' by bringing the Church's spiritual power into the 'secular' struggle against apartheid". And when Martin Luther King was imprisoned for the part he played in the struggle for racial equality in America, he wrote from his prison cell about his disappointment that some Christians did not support the demonstrations against racial injustice because they viewed racial discrimination as "social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern".

Over the years people have used a line from today's Gospel reading in two different opposing ways. "Give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and give to God what belongs to God". That has been interpreted to support the idea that the secular and the spiritual are two separate realms. However, others have understood the line to mean the exact opposite: as a call to rebel against corrupt governments. Indeed, there are few biblical passages that have provoked such radically different responses.

But, it's no wonder that there are such varied views on the interpretation of this verse, for Jesus had to speak in a deliberately ambiguous way. He was being set up by these two opposing groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, who were trying to catch him out with the question: was it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

If Jesus had answered "yes" there would have been uproar in the crowd and Jesus would have lost respect amongst the ordinary people. This tax was hated by the Jews because it had to be paid directly to the emperor and so acted as a constant reminder that their land was occupied by a foreign power. On top of that, it had to be paid in Roman coins. These had an image of the head of Caesar's father's name Emperor Tiberius on one side surrounded by words describing him as "the son of the god, Augustus". This reflected the emperor-worship which was encouraged by Rome but of course considered idolatrous by Jews.

On the other hand, if Jesus had declared that taxes should not be paid to Caesar, he would have been seen by the Romans as inciting rebellion and faced immediate arrest and possible execution. Jesus realised it was a trap, so he responded with an answer that could be taken either way. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's" could be taken to mean

“pay Caesar the tax because the coin you pay it in bears his father's image and so belongs to him”. However, “give to God what is God’s” could be understood to mean that “everything belongs to God and therefore Caesar has rights to nothing”.

Jehovah's Witnesses

We often get Jehovah's Witnesses knocking at our door, normally I don't have chance to slip on my collar before answering the door and so they are often oblivious to who they are talking to. I have to admit sometimes I'm a bit naughty and play along with them, but at other times I'll tell them who I am, just to cause less embarrassment. In some ways I really admire the Jehovah's Witnesses, they are really confident in their faith because they study and know the scriptures inside out, even though their interpretation is somewhat skewed and have changed the Bible to suit their doctrine.

I remember one time when one man knocked on the door, when I opened it, he came out with their usual line, "Do you think it's a terrible world we live in?" I didn't want to mess with him too much, so I immediately admitted who I was. "Oh, which church is it you vicar of?" he said. I indicated behind him to the large building, popping up over the roofs of the houses down the street. He then

became a bit nervous and said, "I went to an Anglican church when I was younger." "That's interesting." I said, "what made you change then?" He said, "Well, when they preached, they mixed their religion with politics." "And do you think that's wrong?" I asked him. "Yes, Jesus told us to just preach about the kingdom" he said, and then he tried to quote some verses of Scripture to back up his claim.

I must say, even though the Jehovah's Witnesses know their scriptures, I really struggle with anyone who cherry-picks verses out of scripture to support a narrow theology. The Bible always has to be read in the context it was written, if it's not, anyone can attach any interpretation they want to selective verses and passages, and I'm afraid that's what the Jehovah's Witnesses tend to do. So, I asked the man "If he believed in only preaching about a kingdom which is to come, then what do you believe about the eschatological understanding of our time?" One of our major Christian understandings is that with Jesus' death and resurrection, God has already established his kingdom, and without going into too much depth that basically means we are all living in God's kingdom in the here and now. God's kingdom has already been established.

I'm afraid the man either didn't understand my question or just ran out of his good answers at that point. So, I then asked him, if we as God's people should somehow be involved with changing this terrible world, which he was so keen to tell me about. "Yes!" He answered, "but we should be involved in preaching the kingdom, not involved in politics."

Not involved

Why is that, as followers of Jesus, we should ever be devoid of being involved in politics, however small that involvement may be? Whether we like it or not, we are all involved in politics just by the sheer privilege of living in a democracy and by having the chance to place our cross on a ballot paper. I hope, rather than just stating politics and religion shouldn't mix, your ballot paper decision is always an informed choice, shaped and influenced by what we know of God's purposes through the reading and interpretation of scripture. The idea that this passage suggests that Christians should keep out of political issues can be ruled out by looking at the rest of the Bible. The principles we find in there inevitably have a political dimension. For instance, the Bible teaches we are all created in God's image, which in itself teaches us that inequalities such as racism need tackling.

One of the very reasons I don't think Christians should support some of our daily newspapers by buying and reading them is because they clearly have racially motivated agendas, one of them in particular has its historical roots in neo-fascist politics and ideals, I'll leave you to work out which one.

Gospel

In looking at this particular gospel reading, we very much see Jesus caught up in the politics of the day. He's been tricked to comment on the politics of paying taxes towards the Roman Empire and tricked into making a comment about the politics of Jewish law. Jesus was not a political activist, yet he was very much involved in the politics of the time. Jesus didn't just preach about the coming of the kingdom, but he also came to tell us how to set the oppressed free, he told parables about looking after those on the edges of our society and about creating an equal society. He was involved directly with those people who had been rejected by others. Jesus wanted to see things changed in his time, and he was involved in trying to bring about a change. How then could we say that Jesus was not involved in politics? In the same vein, how can we ever say, as people of God, we should never be involved in politics. But the politics we should be involved in, are not politics of self gain and

greed, but politics, which bring about freedom and fairness to an ever unjust and mixed up world.

Faith, belief and politics should never mix. Really? I wonder which Bible, the man on my doorstep was reading, because one thing's for sure it certainly isn't the same Bible that I am reading.