

## Year A Proper 29 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2023

Isaiah 45: 1-7

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

Matthew 22: 15-22

### Allegiance to God

Our scripture readings today all follow the broad theme of how we should live our lives in accordance with God's will. We are best able to understand God's will by studying the life of Jesus; his teachings, and how he modelled a way of being that pleases God.

Our gospel reading about the denarius is well-known and as it is in the three synoptic gospels it appears in each of the three years in our Lectionary readings (Mark 12: 13-17 & Luke 20:20-26).

What I am sure we all recall is that the Pharisees and Herodians conspired together to try and trap Jesus into giving an answer to them, in a public space, that would turn the crowds against him.

Firstly, we should note that the Pharisees and Herodians were not natural bedfellows. Anything but! The Pharisees, a group of Jews who wanted to follow every written and oral law of their tradition, and fervently wanted a theocracy in their land, were happy to join with the Herodians. Although there is some doubt as to exactly who was in this group, we can assume that the Herodians were supportive of the Roman rule of Judea as their wealth and power came from being the ruling elite doing Rome's bidding in the province over many years.

Secondly, we can all spot the ingratiating opening to their conversation with Jesus. It is almost Uriah Heep-ish in its cloying flattery, calling Jesus a man of integrity and teaching the way of God in accordance with the truth. Jesus immediately called them hypocrites, before asking for a coin used for paying the Roman poll tax. His challengers produced a denarius, a silver coin with the image of a human on it and inscribed with 'Divi Filius', (Son of God) and 'Pontifex Maximus' (Chief Priest). Because the Romans knew how hated this coin was for pious Jews, the Jews were allowed to use their own local brass coinage for everyday business. No pious Jew would need or want to have a higher value silver denarius on them.

This silver coin was a part of the accusers undoing. They seemed to be happy to use this idolatrous coin and yet were claiming the ethical and religious high ground against Jesus.

Jesus told them that as they used the emperor's coins they couldn't object to paying his tax. Jesus also called into question the presumption in their question that there is an incompatibility between loyalty to the governing authority and loyalty to God. We can pay our dues to the emperor, as a dutiful citizen, whilst also paying our dues to God and being a loyal servant of our God.

We pay our taxes, and that is relatively simple. It normally comes out of our pay or our pension, and we set up direct debits for local authority taxes, and some of us also complete a tax return every year. None of this is hard to achieve.

Our taxes are a proportion of our income, worked out by the government. But how do we pay our dues to God? And what percentage of our beings do we offer to God? Just asking the question to myself, as if it was a tax rate, was quite provocative.

Can we reflect on our lives and say we have been faithful to God, without preconditions or any limits, with absolutely no prevarications or equivocations? I certainly cannot. Today's Gospel reading uncomfortably reminds me of times when it was easy to be swayed by a larger group to say or contemplate thoughts and actions which go against the greatest commandments, we pledge to follow each and every week.

I wonder which of the Pharisees and Herodians were the 'ringleaders', and how many of the others were true followers and how many were too afraid to raise an objection to this conspiracy to bring down this Galilean teacher?

I wonder how easy it is for us to unconsciously fall into the same trap. To not object to little things said or done which go against Jesus' command to love our neighbour? How deep and how far do we go before realising that we have unintentionally strayed from God's ways? A bit like the 'boiling frog' 'scenario (look it up if you don't know the reference).

We know the pharisees had focussed on the wrong ways of being. They chose to focus on the written and oral rules. To focus on doing things a certain way, and as their name reminds us, set themselves apart from other Jews because in carrying out the normal day to day activities in living in that society it was impossible to follow all the written and oral rules.

Jesus was teaching a different way, the ways of God. Jesus whole way of being; his ministry, was a perfect example of seeking justice with compassion. He was far less concerned with the rules themselves than with the results they led to. Any rule that produced an impoverished class of people, produced suffering,

lifted up one group over another, created rules and structures that advantaged one group socially and economically above others (influence and affluence) that did not produce a benefit for all the people, were to be ignored and preferably discarded. Today, we would use the word 'systemic justice' to describe what Jesus was preaching and living out through his healing ministry and in his relationships with the disciples and the much wider group of followers.

We know that God cares so deeply about all people, made in God's image, and that an injustice suffered by one person diminishes us all.

When we look at the state of our world today, we can see how systemic injustice leads to suffering; suffering by the planet and to all the flora and fauna because of how humans have treated it; suffering to our fellow humans because people have not lived according to God's laws as expressed by Jesus and as we recite the Summary of the Law each Sunday – to love our God and to love our neighbour.

These last two weeks of events in the Holy Land have been heart-breaking. Nothing can excuse the killings by terrorists from Hamas and no-one should find a way to condone their actions. However, given the treatment of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel through the actions of their Defence Force and settler groups in the West Bank, it is understandable why the systemic injustice of the Palestinians, led to such horrendous killings in Southern Israel. I pray that there may be peace with justice across the Holy Lands, that all peoples may live in peace. There will be no peace without justice.

In preparing for this sermon, through prayer and as always, walking with Misty and letting the scriptures dwell within me, the question of our allegiance to God struck me. In my time of prayer and reflection, I could find the strength and honesty to confess my failings to God. To own up to how difficult it can be to speak up, to stand out from the crowd, to take what may well be a narrow path, less trodden – the path of compassion, peace and systemic justice, showing God's love for all of God's people, acknowledging and not remaining silent to acts of injustice, for the greatest cause of human misery and suffering is and always has been systemic injustice.

I pray I can find the strength to offer my allegiance to God's ways much closer to 100% than the % rate I pay for my taxes. I don't know about you, but I am

sure it is a life's work, to offer myself to God afresh each and every day, committing to love my God with all my heart, and soul, and mind and strength, and to love my neighbour. May your prayers be likewise.