

REFLECTION
SLIDE 17

'Two Empires or One Kingdom?'

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Once again, we have another story of a challenge and confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders and elites. In this case, the Pharisees and those who supported Herod as King (that is, as vassal King of the real rulers - the Romans), or is it more than that?

The scene is set. Here we are gathering in a space where differing views can be expressed in a degree of safety. Probably on a mound outside of town where people can gather and listen as well as escape if it becomes boring or too radical. It has to be pretty safe because we have a few Chief Priests and a bunch of Pharisees and Jesus and his followers. We are told that the reason the Chief Priests are there is because they have heard about the parables attributed to Jesus and being the scholars and church-men they are they have realised he is speaking about them in somewhat challenging ways. They obviously discuss this and decide that action is required and they see in the Herodians an ally in their task of defending themselves in the face of what is being said about them.

The interesting thing about this alliance is that these two groups were not natural allies. The Herodians are people who supported the rule of Herod and who cooperated with the Roman rulers and because of that cooperation were given authority by Romans. The Pharisees on the other were the legalists among the Jewish leaders who believed that their interpretation of the Law was the one to be obeyed. When they spoke of the law of course they specifically meant Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They were the protectors of the faith, the boundary keepers and of course the bunch that held the power of clergy within the community. This was a creative yet fragile alliance pulled together to address a common enemy. In this case Jesus who was obviously being listened too, maybe even at the expense of the regular attendance at the synagogue and politically challenging those who were leading a comfortable life in the lap of the Romans.

Then this alliance discussed their common enemy and devised a way to entrap Jesus in what he was saying. Not the Pharisees didn't go themselves but rather sent their disciples. Maybe Jesus would get too much status if they themselves fronted up. It might look like they were afraid of him and they might get their hands dirty if they were seen in their robes and elaborate dress to be giving Jesus too much kudos?

And when the opportunity to engage arrives they unfold their trap.

'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for a person's rank means nothing to you. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'

What does Jesus do? He doesn't lie down or respond passively. He; being aware of their malice, of their political alliance in the interests of power and he says:

'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?'

He then addresses their weapon, the paying of taxes to Rome;

Show me a coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then Jesus said to them: *'Whose head is this, and whose title?'*

They answered: 'The emperors.'

Then Jesus said to them: 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.'



We remind ourselves that the aim of the question is not to get an answer but to trap Jesus. So, what does it mean to give to Caesar a Roman coin? The Pharisees in defense of their faith would have regarded these Roman coins as idolatrous. The contained an image of Tiberius, Caesar, who would have been considered as divine by the Romans. The point Jesus makes about them being hypocrites can be made by the group of Pharisees simply producing the coin in the temple as they had shown themselves up as hypocrites in their stance. Whereas it is more than likely that the Herodians had no problem with the Roman coin, after all they have allied themselves with Rome.

So, we are left with the question, should they pay tax? I wonder if you can see the trap. If Jesus says yes what will the Pharisees say? If he says no what will the Herodians say? Jesus who is known to always speak the truth to that simple question will be caught out. He will be backed into a corner so that whatever his answer Jesus would get in strife with the authorities. This was the clever question devised by both Pharisee and Herodian.

But they have underestimated Jesus as he cleverly avoids the trap yet at the same time confronts his adversaries with a conundrum in terms of their loyalties. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

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As this weekend is general election weekend and our society is at risk of change both for the better and for ill, it is pertinent to ask the question about the relationship between religion and politics. We can see in some reports from the United States of America the mess that an ignorance of this relationship can result in when the desire for power is underestimated or manipulated for partisan influence. The question they needed to ask was "did you give to Caesar what is Caesar's or to God what is God's?" The questions we might ask ourselves are; Did you separate religion from politics? Did you agree that we should pay our tax but not let our spirituality impact our political decisions? For you did religion and politics mix or not? Did your views on abortion and the sanctity of life wrestle with the euthanasia referendum. Did your care for others influence your vote on the cannabis referendum? And finally do you sense that those questions are about to trap you in some way?

It is pretty much agreed that in the scriptures the intermingling of religion and politics is constant. In the Old Testament again and again we read of how God ascribed political power to even the foreign rulers and enemies. They ruled because God made it so.

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Jesus himself was incredibly immersed in challenging the political powers and the social structure of his day. This understanding has become more and more narrowed down with the paucity of original text and recent discoveries. The New Testament scholar N.T.Wright says of Jesus whatever else he wasn't, Jesus was a politician.

All this strongly suggests that this passage can be wrongly interpreted to mean that politics and religion don't mix. Keep what is Caesars away from what is God's. What is evident is that this assumption that is made by many in our post-enlightenment world has arisen out of teachings and understandings that have emerged since the time of at least the Reformation.

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It is true that this phrase, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's" is one of the better-known quotes of Jesus and very possibly one of the worst understood. In trying to see behind Jesus words what should be patently clear very quickly is that Jesus believed everything belonged to God, all things were derived from God, even political power. There was no such thing as a difference or a division between faith and politics.

Around 500 years ago Martin Luther argued for a distinct line to be drawn between the spiritual and political realms. One could suggest that the ascendancy of the left hemisphere of the brain became more evident. In this development it seems that the distinction between spiritual and political has been wrongly understood as saying the two don't mix. Without going into too much of the history of the situation the issue for Luther was who and how that power was being exercised.

Another factor to consider is that alongside the rejection of the spiritual in favour of a secular understanding the enlightenment has served to deceive us into thinking that our faith somehow should not have a political edge. The American experience and the rise in political Christian parties in NZ can be seen as an attempt to restore this relationship but the problem is that the differential mindset is still strong. It is more of a takeover bid for the political sphere rather than an integrated relationship.

If we consider that all things belong to God, including the way in which we structure our society then as people of the Jesus Way we need to live as though life is a spiritually inclusive life. Then who we vote for, what issues we choose to fight for, are both the political and religious outworking of our faith. And dare I say it this means that we need to live at though life is a living journey of co-creation made real and meaningful by loving one another and especially those who disagree with us.

Even what we choose to pray for, or even more importantly not pray for, in our prayers for the world indicates both a political and religious stance! The words we use, the phrases indicate our alliances to that which we name God. After all, when we seek as Jesus sought, a society of peace and love, it was for a new realm where political, social, economic and religious change had been achieved.

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So, on this weekend of election of our next government the issue is not whether or not your particular party wins, It is not whether or not Christian values win through. Its rather that whatever one's political allegiance might be, and I know some of you are card carrying members of various parties, one's first allegiance is to Gospel that Jesus of Nazareth gave his energy and life to which is an alternative society of non-violence, non-discriminatory, acceptance and inclusion of the different and the establishment of a dynamic and integrated process of co-creation.

My own recent experience of this failure of integration of politics and faith has been a Presbytery caught up in the legal world of the book of order and has been unable to find the spirit of grace, compassion, and truth because it has lost the ability to hold together politics and faith and thus like the Pharisees and the Herodians become thrown into a defensive mindset that reflects inability to hold together politics and faith. In this case the law being included has been the law of the land and not the Torah. Even the conscience vote was nullified by the process.

Not unlike the Presbyterian Church and its support for commissioners as opposed to delegates sometimes in parliament they have what is called a conscience vote. This is a time when politicians are allowed by their parties to vote based on their personal moral, philosophical or religious stance on an issue because of its moral content. In a sense this misses the point that every single decision made by any parliament is a decision that has moral content and has religious or faith implications. It almost seems that all decisions in parliament should be made in this way but then maybe that's not enough?

Sometimes the Presbyterian Church makes decisions and advocates in the community for particular issues. Sometimes you may agree, sometimes not, sometimes you may get the impression that the Church is taking sides in politics. Whilst this may appear to be the case I believe that in these situations men and women of faith like yourselves are seeking to discern what it might mean to proclaim support or 'the kingdom come' in terms of specific issues confronting our community. Here in this community just a few weeks ago I heard it said that the demise of the public questions committee was a result of our church's ability to bridge the growing gap between politics and faith.

As individuals and as a local community of faith it could be said that the challenge of being Jesus followers is to seek to discern how we might live out every aspect of our lives and the separation of concerns is not the way to achieve this. Objectification

without a responsive interconnection is destructive and maybe even violent towards a loving community.

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Living the Jesus Way heralds a new realm. When we pray 'your kingdom come' we are making a political statement as much as a religious one. As we walk the Jesus Way and witness to a transformative love the challenge is to not deceive ourselves: the political decisions that we make are faith decisions, our lifestyle choices are faith decisions; in fact, all of our decisions are faith decisions. So whatever or whomever we vote for we need to take a moment to consider the decisions we have made or are making. Ask ourselves, what does it mean for me and for others 'do my choices contribute to a Jesus Way of living or just to a better political outcome? Are they both and spiritual and political? Amen.

DISCUSSION (If time and facility available)