

God and Caesar

The authorities in Jerusalem are on edge. It's the season of Passover and it holds ancient, dangerous memories – of a captive people set free from an oppressive regime. At such a time there's always a risk that some hothead might try to start an uprising against the Romans and bring everything crashing down – and this Jesus seems a likely candidate. He's already caused a stir by riding into the city in a procession and then causing a scene in the temple. So some of the authorities meet and plot against him, and chapter 22 of Matthew describes several attempts to skewer him. The first, our passage this morning, fixes Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. Here, in this occupied city, under the watchful eyes of the empire, with nationalistic sentiments strong and rebellion in the air, they ask this explosive question: 'is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?' And Jesus knows the score. Tell the people to pay up – burdened and crushed by taxes as they are - and he's on the side of the Romans and an enemy of the people. Tell the people not to pay up and he's reported for sedition and he's on his way to a sticky end. It's a lose-lose scenario for Jesus. So what does he do? Well, he's crafty. He asks for a coin, a particular coin used for paying tax, and asks whose image is on it. Caesar's? Well, give back to Caesar his grubby little coin and give to God what is God's – i.e. everything.

Now, we should not read too much into this passage. Jesus is not providing us with a political programme. This is not a discourse on church-state relations. It's really a plea by Jesus to the Jews to get right with God. Yet it does provide us with an opportunity to think about Christianity and politics, how we relate our faith to society and the Christian presence in the world. And I want to do this under three headings. In traditional Christian theology – and most certainly in the Reformation theology of John Calvin who is our pin-up in the Church of Scotland - Jesus has been thought of in three ways. He's been understood as Prophet and as Priest and as King. These are what are sometimes called the threefold offices of Christ. And belonging as they do to Christ they belong also to us, the church, the body of Christ. And it's under these three headings that I want to think about the role of the church in society today – what it means to be responsible citizens who claim ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Let's start, then, with the first of Jesus' three offices – that of prophet. What it might mean for the church to be a prophetic community? Prophets, of course, are basically people who speak God's Word into society, and often that is a challenging word that calls for change. The eyes of the prophets discern where society is out of kilter, where it's going wrong, and their mouths proclaim repentance, the need to change. Often the prophet speaks truth to power. Armed only with the authority of God the prophet stands before the thrones and trappings of the authorities and dares to speak for God. And don't we just long for the church to be prophetic like that, fired by the prophetic word?

There's a problem, however. You see, the thing about prophets is that they speak to the community of faith, to God's own special people. The prophets of old addressed Israel, because the prophetic task was to call the community of God's people to account. So when the prophets address the nation they are appealing to certain common convictions. Their call, for example to practice justice for the poor is premised on the conviction that God wants justice for the poor. And when the prophet declares, 'thus says the Lord...' they are appealing to a common recognition of the God of Israel and his authority. But that doesn't work with a society that no longer believes in our God. We say, 'thus says the lord...' and they say, 'who's he?' Or, to take another example: Christian belief that human beings are made in the image of God is one basis for belief in human dignity. We bear the stamp of God just as that coin that was given to Jesus bears the stamp of Caesar. And that might lead Christians to speak out against the death penalty, or abortion, or genetic engineering, or to speak up for refugees and asylum seekers – because that's where belief in the image of God can take you. But if you don't believe in God then convictions about the image of God are meaningless.

There is also, of course, the uncomfortable fact that if the prophetic word speaks first to the people of God, in our case the church, then it means that the church might have to get its act together. To put it mildly, it's hard for the church to point the finger at injustice and wrongdoing when the world looks at it and does not exactly see a paradigm of equality and inclusion. 'Let judgement begin with the church!' is the core prophetic word, the fundamental message of the prophet.

That brings us to another of Christ's offices and we'll here skip to the third one. Christ as well as Prophet is King, Lord of all. And Christians are

called to bear witness to Christ's sovereign rule. And that means opposing everything that resists or contradicts Christ's rule. Jesus' realm is founded upon justice and peace and so we work for justice and peace in society. Now two things need to be said about this. The first is that as Christians we have to accept that the rule of Christ in the world – for now! – is contested and not yet complete. And that means that at times we have to accept compromise, that the world is not yet as Christ wants it to be. Take, for example, this incident in our reading. Jesus is quizzed about taxation and he asks for a coin. Now, this coin has Caesar's image on it, and it also has an inscription describing Caesar as son of God and high priest. Well, that is blasphemy! And it's interesting that Jesus does not have one of those coins on him and has to ask for one, as even carrying such a coin was colluding with evil. But Jesus does not make an issue of this. He doesn't denounce the person who gave him the coin. He just gently exposes the hypocrisy of his opponents, for anyone who carries such a coin is implicated in a corrupt and twisted system. And so with us. We too are part of the empire, the system, whether we like it or not. My UK taxes go to fund an arms industry that supplies countries that are causing death and misery and fuelling war and conflict. And so much of what I eat is part of an unsustainable and cruel food industry. And my plenty is at the expense of someone else's lack, and every grace uttered before a meal should really be a prayer of penitence and confession for an unequal world. It's so hard to completely dissociate from the sins of the system. So, yes, let's expose and denounce evil but let's do it with some humility and awareness that it's only the sinless that should throw stones.

There again, there is also the problem that Christians themselves do not agree on what is sinful. We do not speak with one voice. It would be so easy if here was a simple check-list of rights and wrongs that we all signed up to, but there isn't. And it's not enough just to appeal to the Bible. It's all in the interpretation, and we can't forget that the Civil war in the USA featured Bible-toting Christians on both sides of the slavery divide. And Christians do not agree today, for example, on taxation, the issue here in our passage, and whether a socialist high taxation approach is more 'biblical' than a capitalist low taxation policy. And Christians are not of one mind on the great moral issues of the day: euthanasia and abortion and war and nuclear weapons and the death penalty – and nor should we always be of one mind. I was annoyed a couple of years ago when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland

passed a resolution basically endorsing the UK's membership of the European Union. No one is more Remainer than me, but do we really know God's view on this issue? Does God even have an opinion on it? There's a place for leaving to the Emperor things that are the Emperors and keeping God well out of it. Indeed there is danger in claiming God for our causes, our issues. A couple of weeks ago we looked at the 10 commandments, and there is that command about not taking the Lord's name in vain. And we associate that with swearing, bad language. But maybe it's about more than that. Maybe it's about tying God's name to our causes, baptising our views, using God's holy name to authorise our opinions. Beware!

So the Church stands under Christ the King and is called to stand for the rule of Christ in the world. But that is often far from clear-cut and often we struggle to agree on the things that are God's.

What, then, about the third of Christ's offices: Christ the priest? Part of Christ's ministry was the offering up to God of prayer and the hallowing of God's name in worship. And this of course is at the heart of the Church's ministry to the world. Israel of old was called to be a priestly nation and so are we. And when we gather together to worship God we become a place where earth is open to heaven, with a ladder of prayer suspended between them. And here the joys and sorrows and the blessings and the pain of the world are articulated and brought into God's nearer presence. Here the world connects and communes with God and his Christ. And here is one of our primary obligations to the emperor, to those who govern. As Paul writes in his 1st Letter to Timothy, 'I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.' There's the priestly vocation of the church towards the state – one of prayer, intercession. It's maybe not so exciting a ministry. We might prefer to be campaigning and protesting and manning the barricades. But it's the one thing that is distinctive of the church, the one thing the empire needs us to do for it.

So, give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's and to God the things that are God's. In an increasingly post-Christian, secular world the place of the church is not what it was. By virtue of Christ our head we are a prophetic, a kingly and a priestly body. But let us acknowledge that the prophetic word addresses us first and holds us to account for our commitment to Jesus. And let us acknowledge some ambiguity and difference about 'the

things that are God's' and learn to live in disagreement. And let's above all be faithful to our calling as a priestly community who unite in praise and worship, in prayer and in supplication for our world, and who bear witness that Jesus and not the Emperor is Lord. Amen

Living, sovereign God,
you have called us to be a people set apart,
a people who bear witness to you
and to your rule over the world.

We pray today, as we are instructed to do,
for those who govern and rule,
for all entrusted with earthly authority.

We pray for the harrowing situation in Myanmar,
with the destruction of Rohingya communities
and the death and displacement of their people.

O God bring an end to this,
and we pray for Aung San Suu Kyi
and all those with power and influence in this tragedy.

We pray for the government of this nation, the Netherlands,
for the coalition of parties that has formed
and that will be in power.

Give wisdom and guidance to them we pray
and so lead the nation in ways that make
for peace and justice and the common good.

And we pray for those who suffer
at the hands of the state in the cause of right:
for those detained without trial,
for prisoners of conscience,
for those persecuted for their religious convictions.

Living God, hasten the day when human rights are respected
and justice prevails.

And we pray for those consumed with hatred
and who would destroy in the name of their faith,
for those for whom faith is a licence to kill.
O God give them grace to turn from their ways
And to follow the path of life and not death.

And God, bless we pray the witness of the church.
Teach us the mind of Christ that we may be truthful;
give us the heart of Christ that we may be faithful;
Pour out the Holy Spirit of Christ that we may
be united even in our differences and disagreements,
And so present to the world a witness to your Kingdom.

We pray al these things in the name of Jesus Christ,
Our Lord, who reigns over all. Amen.