

Matthew 22:15-22

18.10.20

A pilgrim church

The authorities in Jerusalem are on edge. It's the season of Passover and it holds ancient, dangerous memories – memories of a captive people set free centuries before from the oppressive regime of Pharaoh in the empire of Egypt. 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 – prompting the authorities to meet and plot against him, and chapter 22 of Matthew describes several attempts to skewer him. The first, in 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 the gallows. 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, I'm pleased that this passage has come up this morning because it leads us, as I hope we'll see, to a subject that I've wanted to address this year, namely the 400th anniversary of the setting sail of the Mayflower to the New world, carrying with it a number of English pilgrims who had spent time here in the Netherlands, including here in Amsterdam. And as we were hearing earlier those pilgrims are commemorated in the beautiful stained glass window here in our church, donated almost a century ago by Americans who wanted to remember what they and others believe to be links between those pilgrims and this church. Those events 400 years ago plunge us into the vexed realm of religion and politics – as does this passage today. And what I want you to notice first about our reading is the tension running through it, the tension between two loyalties: on the one hand loyalty to Rome, the Empire, and on the other hand loyalty to God; the tension that is being exploited here by the Pharisees with their apparently innocent question: 'is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? And that is a tension that persists in Christianity as we strive as Christians to live in two realms: the realm of this world and the realm of God's new world inaugurated by Christ. It's the tension the early Christians felt between confessing Caesar as Lord and confessing Jesus as Lord, the tension between the Empire of Rome and the Kingdom of God. It's a tension that we find running through the New Testament which speaks of Christ's kingdom being not of this world and of Christians having their citizenship in heaven – which does not mean that we have our heads in the clouds and that we belong elsewhere but rather that ultimately we are submissive only to Christ and that will always make us to some extent aliens and strangers in the world.

So moving on from the New Testament we find this tension between Christ and Caesar, kingdom and empire growing ever stronger in the early centuries of Christianity, as the church was persecuted fiercely and Christians were made to feel increasingly like aliens – until something decisive happened. In the year 313 the Emperor Constantine who had apparently embraced the Christian faith – there is some debate about that - formally legalized it, and in the years that followed Christianity became first an official religion of the empire and then *the* official religion. Well, then everything changed – some would say for the worse – as Christianity in effect became the empire, or at least became inextricably identified with it. These were the centuries of what we now call 'Christendom', when Christianity became a geopolitical power. And how then did the kingdom of Christ relate to the kingdoms of this world? How did Christ's authority sit with political and imperial authority? Well, the answer to that is complex, but basically we could say that in Christendom the Christian religion functioned as the glue that held society together. The faith offered a common set of beliefs and practices which united and bonded people together. The year was patterned according to the story of salvation with its festivals, and to be a true citizen was to be baptised – and all were compelled to be baptised. In this account the church enshrines all the values

that society cherishes and treasures, and to be a Christian is to be a decent, law-abiding citizen. What has been lost here, however, is that Biblical sense of Christians being in tension with the world, of being aliens and strangers who march to a different tune.

Now, this brings me back to the 17th century, and the Mayflower and the pilgrims who for various reasons that go beyond this sermon were rediscovering this tension: of faith no longer functioning as social glue but rather as an alternative, a contrast to the world and its ways. What brought the pilgrims here to the Netherlands and then on to the new world was not just a quest for religious freedom. It was more than that. Theirs was a different understanding of faith as something that sets us apart, not conforming us to the world but transforming us into something different. They were known as ‘separatists’ for they were rediscovering the call to be separate, and with that went a greater separation between Christ and Caesar, the kingdom and the empire and between the church and the state.

Now this is why, sorry to say, the pilgrims would not have been too at home here in this church. In some ways this church embodies beautifully the tension we have been talking about. For years the church has seen itself as having a proud place in Amsterdam, with an important and respected role in the life of the city, and close links with the powers that be. So when William of Orange and his wife Mary left to become king and queen of Great Britain in 1689 they gave the church the ornate brass lectern which still adorns the pulpit. And those who became the pilgrims would not have taken well to the fact that the minister of this Church was paid by the city fathers; and that those same city fathers attended the church and would some fifty years later sit in the newly-installed Burgomaster’s pew which used to face the pulpit, a somewhat ominous symbol of scrutiny and control. Indeed a major motive for the handing over of this church to the English speaking community in 1607 was to divert godly English-speaking folk well away from separatists, from those radicals with their critical approach to political power. And so in this one building we have on the one hand the William and Mary lectern and the Burgomaster pew with all their associations of worldly power – while on the other hand, up there, we have this beautiful window, depicting the departing pilgrims: aliens from this world and its power structures, and whose citizenship in Christ’s Kingdom prompted their journey to the New World. The tension is embodied in our church.

All of which brings us today. And what we have to face today, at least in this part of the world, is the collapse of Christendom, the imploding of the worldly power and status of the Christian religion and the church. Christianity is increasingly no longer the glue that holds society together. People no longer look to the church as the embodiment of society’s cherished values – they look for all that elsewhere. And I would suggest that all this is a God-given invitation to rediscover our true identity as pilgrims, to rediscover the tension between church and world, God and Caesar - what it means to march to a different tune. It is a God-given invitation to move from one set of symbols in our church to another: from the William and Mary lectern and the Burgomaster pew – to the window of the pilgrims, aliens in this world, voyagers to a new world.

In so doing, however, we must recognise that we are re-connecting with foundational features of our faith. Tracing the story of the people of God takes us back to the setting of our passage from Matthew’s Gospel this morning, to the Passover and to the memory of the Israelites, powerless and enslaved in Egypt and in the shadow of Pharaoh’s empire. But God led them out and gave them a law which set them at odds and in tension with Egypt and Pharaoh and the nations of the earth. And later in the Old Testament we find God’s people again in captivity, in exile, aliens in the empire of Babylon and asking, ‘how can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’ And that’s the question that faces us today. But we are in touch here with our roots, in Egypt and Babylon, with our true identity as aliens and strangers in the world – pilgrims! - and it may just be that the best days are yet to come.

One last point. In recent weeks we were studying Paul’s letter to the Philippians, and last week our reading included some verses that I did not comment on. They come in chapter 4, verse 8, and they read: ‘whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything

worthy of praise, think about these things'. Now, this is important. When we talk about Christians being in tension with the world, we are not talking about the world which God made and God loves and that is so full of wonder and beauty and splendour. We are talking about the world as the system, the human-made system which orders things by exalting power and wealth and creating inequality and poverty and ecological devastation. And if the Christian life is marked by tension with that system, let it embrace all the more joyfully the true world. Let Christians be known not for negativity and being judgemental but rather for exalting and rejoicing in all that is good and beautiful and true and lovely – all to the praise and glory of God. amen.