

Sermon: Render unto Caesar...

St Michael's, Trinity XXIII

Today's Gospel reading gives us one of those great moments of theatrical confrontation between Jesus and his enemies. In the public square, the Pharisees and the Herodians demand of Jesus, *Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?* In other words, did Jesus think it was right for devout Jews to pay taxes to the Romans, the occupying power. This was a trap which, had Jesus fallen into it, could easily have led at once to his arrest. If he had answered that it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, he would have been resented by the Jewish multitude as being sycophantic towards the Romans. If he had said, *Don't pay your taxes!* the Herodians – who supported the Roman occupation – would have accused him before the Roman authorities and Jesus would have been condemned for inciting civil disobedience and sedition.

Coins of that period were usually issued by rulers and they bore the image of the ruler on them. The coin they showed to Jesus bore the image of Caesar. This was much more significant than the Queen's head on our coinage. First of all, there was the Jewish commandment which prohibited images. More seriously, Caesar had proclaimed that he should be worshipped as a god. And thus paying tribute to Caesar in the wider sense meant disobeying the first commandment: *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* Jesus answers their trick question with a masterpiece of systematic vagueness: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.*

This dramatic incident has always been seen as the very centre of the discussion about a Christian man's duty in society; the subject of Church and State. Where should we turn for guidance beyond the latest political pamphlet? St Paul is helpfully explicit. He says:

Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil...For he is the minister of God to thee for good.

We belong to the Church of England and all Incumbents at their appointment by the Bishop are obliged to assent to our *Thirty-nine Articles*. Article 37 says

The King's majesty hath the chief power in this Realm of England... to rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal...The bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England.

This is to say that the Queen is Head of both Church and State and therefore no other power internal or external has any greater authority over us. For three centuries after Henry VIII, the encroaching foreign power was perceived by most Englishmen to be the papacy. Most people are not much fussed by ecclesiastical politics these days and so some might perceive that the threat to national sovereignty nowadays comes from that other international bureaucracy, the EU. C.H. Sisson referred to both the papacy and EU as *international gangs of opinion*.

But isn't the authority of the Christian faith above the authority of the State? God is surely greater than the Queen? Of course. But, at her Coronation, the Queen was anointed with holy oil and accepted a copy of the Bible. She dedicated herself to serve the nation under God. So our Christian faith does not provoke a conflict of loyalties. This does not mean we have to agree with every policy produced by the government of the day. But it does mean that any disagreement with government policies must be

conducted within the law. For all our laws are constitutionally and really the expressed will of the Queen in Parliament.

But you might say, surely the supreme law of God – that we love him with all our heart, soul mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves – goes beyond a merely national framework. Yes, of course it does. And we should behave like Christian ladies and gentlemen even when we are in France – even when we are in Rome. The meaning of our Church of England is that our duty to God is set out for us in *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* and in the teaching consistently derived from these texts by the great theologians and expositors of the Anglican tradition: such as Hooker, Law, Donne, Lancelot Andrewes, George Herbert. And the neighbour we are commanded to love is not some abstraction – humanity in general – but literally our near neighbour, our fellow countryman.

In other words traditional, historical English Christianity is not an abstract theory or code but a local, actual and incarnated relationship. And the English Settlement of the 16th century was an attempt to make one and the same thing out of that which is rendered both to God and to Caesar. This works in the Person of the Queen as head of both Church and State. This Settlement of genius has given us a decent set of political liberties in this country for 400 years and, with the Acts of Toleration of Dissenters in 1828 and Roman Catholics in 1829, it has improved upon even its own fine beginning.

Unfortunately, what we now see is that the people appointed to uphold the Church of England, who promised on their appointment that they *would* uphold it – bishops and the like – have destroyed it. They hate this entity called the Realm of England and they are doing all in their power to denigrate it, preferring instead their own internationalist fantasies and despising our history as a nation under God.

First they sidelined *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. Then they invented their own prayer books in which they set themselves in order of precedence above the Queen. If you will hold your nose and dare to look into those new and inferior titles *The Alternative Service Book* and *Common Worship*, you will see that in the prayers for the church and for the world, the bishops put themselves first.

And then they began to abandon Christian teaching and first acquiesce in and then actually promote the antichristian values of secular society: that series of universalised abstractions – theoretical human rights, anti-racism, feminism, anti-sexism, non-discrimination, diversity, environmentalism, the pagan fantasy of global warming and moral relativism. Anything goes. Whenever the bishops and the Synod were faced with a choice between Christian teaching and secular ideology, fads and fashions, they chose the secular. The victory of these traitors and iconoclasts was assured once they achieved majorities among the bench of bishops and in the Synod and so promoted themselves and their cronies relentlessly these last forty years, until now there is barely even an opposition to them and their doings.

W.H. Auden referred to the English Christian Settlement as *our luck*. And he asked, *Why should we spit on our luck?* But we have spat upon it. The degraded, faithless hierarchy has not even sold our inheritance for a mess of potage: in a prolonged spasm of ignorant and destructive self-interest, they have thrown it away. In the face of this there is only one thing for faithful Anglicans, English Christians

who understand the disaster that has overtaken us, to do. We must, as we promised, stay and fight our corner.

And there is one more thing, one eruption so profound that it is of the nature of last resort. C.H. Sisson wrote:

The Queen rules through her ministers and she does not rule any the less for that. The minister does not attend to the details of his department's administration. The minister has one inalienable function which is to secure the coherence of his department. The Queen has one inalienable function which is to secure the coherence of her country

The final safeguard of our unity is a single Person present on the throne by hereditary right and form of law. If we depart from that, we admit the legitimacy of faction. No doubt it is only in the most desperate troubles, such as we pray we shall be preserved from, that that Person would present herself to us so directly. But it is well that we should not allow sloppy ideas to obscure what would be our duty in such an emergency.

These most desperate troubles now beset us. As the precise character and acuteness of this emergency become clearer, we must pray that we do not fail in our duty.