



Reading: Matthew 22:15 – 22

Date: October 18, 2020

Theme: What things are God's and what things are gods?

Some of you may be familiar with the film, "Joyeux Noël", set in 1914 in the early months of the First World War. It's Christmas Eve and the German, French and Scottish troops are facing each other from trenches when suddenly, someone starts singing 'Silent Night'. Other singing begins, a truce is called, the soldiers start sharing gifts, and exchanging photos. And the result? The military and religious leaders on both sides tell the soldiers to get back to fighting, that it is their Christian duty to kill the enemy! Are they rendering to Caesar or to God?

The first historian of the church – Eusebius – stopped his history at the point where Constantine declared Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. They had won! The kingdom had taken over the world; Christ had conquered Caesar. He considered that Christians didn't have to think any more about whether they were fulfilling their obligations to Caesar or to God, because Constantine was Christian! And that understanding has coloured the church's thinking ever since. That is the very basis of Christendom. We render to God what belongs to God by making our government and our processes and our culture Christian. But the unspoken truth is that Caesar never really became Christian. Constantine took on the religion of Jesus Christ because he interpreted a sign that gave him victory in a battle. That's hardly a conversion in the light of the thousands of Christians who refused to serve in the Roman army because they owed their allegiance to Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace! And so on, down through the centuries, where so called Christian kings and emperors and presidents have started wars, ignored the poor and the sick, trampled on justice and oppressed minorities. Because Caesar, government, or empire is always about power and authority and 'national interest', and not about service, justice and humanity. And so, Eusebius was wrong, it wasn't the end of history; the stories of Jesus are not confined to a different past – where the church was struggling against the state – the prophet's words to the kings of Israel, when the church was the state, still live. And the stories of Jesus remain true. Putting two texts side by side:

You cannot serve two masters; you will hate one and love the other. You cannot serve both God and Caesar.

Here we are, in the 21st Century, where, despite the obsession in the US elections about which candidate is the better Christian, Christendom is over and the division of church and state – Caesar and God – is increasingly real. Each of us needs to take on the words of Jesus and figure out what they mean in our daily living.

Are we following our baptismal obligation to the way of God in Jesus Christ by obeying the rules and laws of the government? Are we only giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and are we giving everything to God that belong to God?

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The way the world is changing makes this question important for all of us. The government is making rules and laws that seem to make it harder and harder to follow the way of Jesus. What we assumed to be the moral, Christian way, now seems to be the minority way. Divorce, abortion, same sex marriage, voluntary dying; all the things we thought we knew were right, are now in question. “Is it lawful?”, doesn’t seem to be the same question as, “Is it right?” We like this story of Jesus being challenged by the Pharisees and the Herodians because the issue looks easy and simple and black and white. However, the way that Jesus calls for – live out your obligations to God – isn’t easy. Jesus answer to the religious/moral/legal question of paying tax to a foreign overlord was philosophically easy - paying the tax doesn’t mean you support all the Caesar stands for - but practically much more difficult – paying the tax doesn’t relieve you from living out your God given obligations to love, justice and mercy. It may feel like paying the tax is wrong because you are breaking the 2nd commandment – make no images – but are you following the other 9? Simple moral questions can become very complex when we really ask, “what are our obligations to God?” We shouldn’t make graven images and worship them – money, government, nation, race etc – but what are our obligations to God and to the people around us who bear the image of God? It is as if we are all dual citizens – citizens of the nation and citizens of the kingdom of God – but it is not an equal obligation. All really belongs to God and our obligations to love and justice and mercy are primary, however we live in this world, and this society, and that also carries obligations. Balancing those sometimes-competing obligations is not easy, but that balancing is an obligation in itself – not to make simple snap judgements but to look to where love and justice and mercy take us. Jesus answer carries the implication that simply observing 1 text of scripture is not enough, our obligation is to all that God has revealed, particularly in the complex, sometimes scripture breaking story of Jesus.

The current restrictions on gathering and visiting are producing great tensions in people’s balancing of our double obligations. We have obligations to worship and to share our love in pastoral care, but are they more important than the restrictions? We also have obligations of love that say we shouldn’t risk people’s lives by interacting. We also have obligations to be the people of God in Christ in whatever situation we are in and not just in church. And the balance of those obligations starts to look different as the restrictions look increasingly unreasonable in the light of damage to mental health and people’s lives and livelihoods. The restrictions in Jesus day of not touching dead bodies or sick people looked reasonable, but the love of God in Jesus broke through those restrictions when it was important to show compassion and to bring the light of life.

The great moral questions also produce tensions in people’s balancing of obligations. It can look simple in the light of scripture or morality but very complex when you look further at the damage to lives, mental health and physical health, of those who become victims of dogmatic morality. Women and children brutalised by an insistence on family values, suicides due to bullying over gender or sexual identity, grinding poverty driven by distorted version of the Protestant work ethic. The balance of obligations looks different when you really follow God’s way of love, justice and mercy. Despite all the moral and legal imperatives, Jesus didn’t throw stones at the prostitute or reject the bleeding woman.

For many, the decisions of government lead to resistance and civil disobedience and indeed, prophetic action. The actions of many in the *Love makes a way* and *Grandmothers against detention* movements are a great example of people balancing their obligations and deciding for God and against Caesar, while still honouring their obligations to Caesar in pursuing political and electoral change.

The intersection of church and state is not a simple matter of 'God said it, I believe it, that settles it', it's a complex issue for each of us to balance up our obligations to God and the Gospel of love, justice and compassion, compared to our obligations to civil citizenship. It's not easy, but it is an important part of our walk with Jesus, the One we honour as Lord over and against all the lords of the earth.

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