

22nd October 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 25 “God is here! As we his people”
 318 “Christ, our King before creation”
 277 “My song is love unknown”
 334 “Praise to the holiest in the height”

READINGS: Psalm 96:1-9
 Matthew 22: 15-22

“ENTRAPMENT”

Does the name Alastair Campbell still ring a bell with you? He was Tony Blair’s media man – the Press and Strategy Director. More recently, by the way, he was here at the Chapel, complete with kilt and bagpipes for the wedding of Wikipedia’s Jimmy Wales to Tony Blair’s Diary Secretary.

Campbell is still in the media business and is the chief interviewer for GQ Magazine – Gentlemen’s Quarterly. Recently, ahead of the meeting of the Anglican Primates from around the world, Alastair Campbell interviewed Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury.

In the interview the first question he posed to the Archbishop was about the possibility of having to do the Queen’s funeral and the enormity of that task. Then Campbell changed tack and asked the Archbishop a very direct question, “Is gay sex sinful?” Welby saw that any answer was going to get him into trouble and tried to deflect the question by saying to Campbell, ‘well, we have done religion, we have done politics, why am I surprised we are onto gay sex.’ After a brief diversion about the fall of the Lib Dem former leader, Tim Farron, over a very similar question, Welby responded to Campbell saying, ‘you know very well that I can’t give you a straight answer.’ He then realised that he should not have used the ‘straight’ in this context and added, ‘sorry, badly phrased there.’

But the words were out of Welby’s mouth and those words, ‘I can’t give you a straight answer’ were picked up by the media more widely.

Campbell’s question – a closed question, begging for a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer had trapped Welby. If the Archbishop were to have said that gay sex is sinful he would have had the LGBT community inside and outside the church down on him like a ton of bricks. If he were to have said it wasn’t sinful he would have had the more conservative section of the church in Britain and around the world down on him ... and just ahead of an important meeting of worldwide Anglican Archbishops and just after the Episcopal Church in Scotland had agreed to conducting same sex marriages. Campbell’s was a simple but clever entrapment question and it worked.

Whatever we think about the issue in question here one can't help feeling for Justin Welby.

Well, our passage from Matthew's Gospel presents us with a very similar situation. The Pharisees sent some of their followers together with the Herodians (of whom more anon) to trap Jesus, to ask Jesus a question which, whatever way he answered, would get him into trouble with one group or the other.

Let us first unpack the context of this incident. Jesus had entered Jerusalem to great acclaim – it was what we now call Palm Sunday. He had told parables and acted in ways that had put both the religious and political leaders on their guard. It was in this week that he had overturned the tables in the Temple Courtyard. In Jesus the leadership in Jerusalem, both religious (the Pharisees) and political (the Herodians) were seeing someone who was undermining their authority.

This animosity towards Jesus brought together people who would usually never have anything to do with each other. Pharisees were deeply religious Jews, Herodians were the supporters of Herod, the Jewish puppet-leader of the hated Romans – they were poles apart in so many ways but together in their opposition to Jesus – a foreshadowing of Jesus' death sentence, cooked up by Jews and Romans.

So this motley group of people came to Jesus. They butter him up first, trying to lure him into a sense of security by flattering him. "Teacher, we know you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." Then comes their question. Their question to trap Jesus.

"Tell us," they say, "is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?" They must have been rubbing their hands in glee for here was a direct question – a closed question – to which Jesus would be forced to answer, 'yes' or 'no.'

If Jesus said that it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor – then a lot of his fellow Jews would see Jesus as supporting the hated, oppressive Roman Empire. It was this group of people who had welcomed Jesus with great acclaim when he rode into Jerusalem. He was, they thought, their liberator from the hated Roman overlords.

If Jesus had said it was not lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor – the Herodians would certainly have gone off immediately and reported Jesus for inciting rebellion. So, the Pharisees and the Herodians thought they had Jesus in a foolproof trap. However he answered their question he would incriminate himself and put his position in jeopardy.

But his questioners underestimated Jesus. He refused to answer their direct question and asked to see the coin used in paying taxes. His questioners bring a coin out of their pockets – a denarius – and then Jesus became the questioner. "Whose head is on the coin? Whose title do you see there?"

Now the Pharisees were already in trouble. If they were carrying the coins of the Empire in their pockets they were breaking the commandments – they should not have had the image of any other god on them - and Roman Emperors were considered gods – it was even written so on the coins. So, in bringing out a coin the Pharisees had already put themselves in trouble with the Jews who knew that these religious leaders profited from changing Roman money into Temple currency. “Giving unto Caesar was working out very profitably for them.”

So Jesus, having seen the Roman coin and having asked whose image is on it, utters the enigmatic words, ‘give to the Emperor what is the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.’ Now, from that time until our own time these words have been open to many interpretations. Some theologians and some churches have interpreted Jesus’ words to mean that there are two separate realms – the secular world where people should give their loyalty to the civil rulers on the one side and the spiritual world in which loyalty should be given to God on the other. But Jesus’ answer to his questioners is surely deeper than that.

When Jesus asked for a coin, he also asked, ‘whose head –whose image (eikon in Greek) is on this coin and whose title? Of course the coin bears Caesar’s image and belongs to Caesar. Human beings on the other hand bear the image of God – as the book of Genesis tells us. “Then God said, ‘let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’” Even a Caesar, an Emperor is human and bears the image and likeness of God. People pay taxes to the Emperor but they do not belong to the emperor. So Jesus is really saying, ‘everything belongs to God.’

Caesar, or any other ruler, can say anything they like on their coinage but God has already stamped the divine image on every human being. Rulers may want to stamp their own image on their people and demand total obedience but God, at creation, has already stamped his image on every one of us.

So Jesus’ response did not give the Pharisees and the Herodians the answer that they wanted and perhaps, it does not give us a neat answer that we might wish for either. This text does not solve the question of the relationship of church and state. It does not answer many lingering issues about Christian obligations to the government of the day – questions of taxation or military conscription to name just two but the passage does set allegiances, loyalties into a priority order. All the world and all its people are stamped with the image of God and their obedience is to God.

How then are we to live as beings stamped with the divine image? There will always be competing demands for our loyalty. In three weeks’ time we will commemorate Remembrance Sunday and be reminded of the horror of war and the great loss of life in two world wars and many other conflicts. Christians came to very different conclusions about their loyalty to the state in the context of war – some signing up as a religious duty, others becoming conscientious objectors – sometimes within the same church.

Our text for today gives us no easy answers. Jesus rarely gave easy answers. Our text urges us to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and the demand on us to act as people created in his image. This passage is not just about money and taxes, it is about the fact that our lives are a constant negotiation between competing claims for our loyalty and obedience.

This passage is about how we live life that is faithful to God in a world that barely knows God. It is about refusing to keep our faith in a box that we unpack only for an hour on a Sunday. It is about trying to relate our faith to the whole of life and then struggling to know what that means day to day.

We could do no better than to have this hymn on our lips and in our minds as our constant guide,

“All my hope on God is founded
He doth still my strength renew
Me, through change and chance he guideth,
Only good and only true.” Amen