

Sunday, October 22nd Trinity 20

Isaiah 45.1-7, Psalm 96.1-9, Matthew 22.15-22

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

During our lives, we make many friends and some, whom we regard as close friends. We may agree with most of what they say and do, but sometimes we may feel that we cannot support them. If that happens, the reaction might be, 'Whose side are you on?'

Today's Gospel is the first of four controversy stories, which serve to bring out some of the issues between Jesus and his critics, and also in Matthew's time between the Church and Judaism.

Today's passage has to do with the payment of tax of one denarius, required by Rome, the occupying power, for all subject people. The question is raised by two groups, Pharisees, who objected to having to pay the tax, and the Herodians, who were sympathetic with the family of the Herods, who ruled as Rome's puppets. Whatever Jesus answered, he would have been wrong; he would have alienated those, who longed for freedom from occupation, and to have supported the opponents of the tax would have led to his being accused of subversion. So, he couldn't win.

The Pharisees were already compromised, as they accepted Roman imperial currency for temple transactions. Jesus' answer shows that he would be trapped by trick questions. He therefore throws the ball back into the questioners' court.

Cyrus in the first reading is Cyrus the Great, king of the Persians, described as 'God's anointed', which came to mean a future ideal ruler. Cyrus, unaware of who is calling him, is under God's orders. The Israelites, however, connected religion and nationhood very closely and found it difficult to accept that God could work through anyone but themselves. But Cyrus is chosen by God to be the agent of the Israelites' freedom from exile in Babylon, and to allow them to return to their homeland.

Psalm 96 was composed for the enthronement festival, and the part, which we have today, is about creation. The Creator required the worship of the whole population. They are to sing a new song, not necessarily completely new, but a familiar hymn, renewed in the present experience of God's majesty. God's name is his presence with the people, and they are to see in this presence the source of all blessing and the authority, to which they must submit.

Today's theme shows that following God is complex, and that we cannot put it into compartments of faith or nationality and believe that the one we belong to has all the answers. Even the nation, which believed that it was appointed by God, could not assume that it was going along the right path all the time, or that it was the only agent of God's will.

Jesus shows on numerous occasions that the religious authorities were outwardly showing allegiance, but were not always behaving in the right way.

We, likewise, cannot claim that we have all the answers, or that other faiths and systems are altogether wrong. God created the whole world, as Psalm 96 shows 'Sing to the Lord, all the earth', and all have something to contribute. What we do need to do is to see if there is a match between the teaching of Jesus and how we behave. It is all summed up in the introduction to the Peace:

'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace; if the live in the Spirit, let us walk in the Spirit.'

One of the worrying things in universities at the present time is the refusal to allow people they disagree with to speak, no platforming. But surely the point of university is to hear different views, to evaluate, and to come to a reasoned conclusion. Do we not need to listen to other people's point of view, or do we say, 'I'm not going to listen to that!' It can lead in extreme cases to a situation like that in the Middle East, where there is such hatred that neither side will ever listen to the other.

Whose side, then, are we on? Are we putting things into compartments, or are we on the side of God, who breaks down barriers and calls many people in many different ways.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.