

Sermon for 22.10.17

In the gospel narrative today we hear two questions asked by the Pharisees, the Herodian's and the Sadducees (three Jewish religious groups) answered by Jesus.

As the story reveals, the groups who ask these questions are not professing that they hold Jesus beliefs to be true, but instead they know well of his fearless readiness to speak his mind, no matter who is listening.

They are confident that Jesus answers to their questions will expose his lawlessness and turn the opinion of the crowd against him.

The Pharisee's and Herodian's begin by flattering him in the hope of drawing him into their fold.

"Teacher we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God ..."

From the outset however, Jesus recognises the reality of the encounter and answers their flattery with truth, "why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" Don't you love him – there's no political correctness here.

Today in the sermon I would like to focus on the two questions put to Jesus and his answers, for, I believe, they hold a continuing relevance for us all.

The first question comes from the Pharisees and the Herodian's, the latter of which we believe to have been supporters of Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee.

In normal circumstances they would not be natural associates of the Pharisees, but as we know, fear and hatred, "acquaints a person with strange bed fellows".

They ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

In response Jesus asks for a coin – he makes his critics supply the evidence for the settlement of the question. "Who's head is this?" he asks. They answer "the emperors!" "Then pay to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is Gods" is Jesus response.

And they were amazed and went away.

In his answer Jesus brings together issues about their law and taxes. He tells them that it is a legitimate action in their society as it is in ours, to pay to Caesar, or the state in our case, what is required – and to God what God requires which is our faithfulness, our steadfastness and love.

God is not separate from the way of society in which we live. God is immersed in all the events of time.

The reading from Isaiah shows us this clearly in the story about the rise of Cyrus. Now Cyrus was not a Jew. He did not know the Hebrew God at all, yet God anointed him and as the Persian ruler he transformed the political map of the Middle East which enabled the exiled Israelites to go home.

God is with us, in the past, in the present and in the future – in personal matters and in matters of society. **Our** response is to be steadfast in our communion with God, for from this intimacy we are sensitive to the movement of God's spirit guiding us, as it did Jesus, to move effectively in the matters of the world.

The second question is about the resurrection and it is put to Jesus by the Sadducees who believed only in the five books of "Moses" as authoritative scripture.

They did not believe in the resurrection, and they hoped that they would expose the absurdity, according to them, of the idea of resurrection.

In their question to Jesus they use the Jewish custom of marriage, which obliged a man to marry his brother's widow and beget children for him so that the line and the name did not die out.

Jesus simply exposes their ignorance "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God."

And he quotes from Exodus, one of the 5 books of Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”.

The tense here is present – God is the God of the living not the dead. In his answer, Jesus proclaims that the power of God which calls into existence the things that do not exist, is able also to give life as eternal children of God to the dead.

Belief in the resurrection, does not carry with it the notion that the dead are raised to a life at all comparable with human existence on earth.

The power of God changes us and gives resurrection bodies. What is implied in the argument is a continued spiritual communion with God that is eternal.

In the epistle Paul writes that an essential part of the gospels effectiveness is the consistent steadfast character it creates in its recipients despite opposition.

He writes about the life of faith, hope and love that moves us not only to render to civil authorities what in justice is required, but that which transforms ourselves and society by going beyond all normal requirements, through our communion with God.

It is my prayer that we may all live in this steadfast communion and be at peace in the loving security that dwells there.

The Lord be with you.

