

S1196 Carrs Lane 19.10.14 Isaiah 45.1 – 7/Matthew 22.15 – 22

Today's passages leave me with more questions than answers...I am not sure whether this means that I like them or dislike them. Even now, there are commentators who voice great disappointment because Jesus does not appear to give a clear mandate for civil disobedience here. The Pharisees, the Herodians and the Zealots were miles apart – and yet none of them will have heard what they wanted to hear at this point. Should I applaud Jesus' cleverness on this account – or despair at an apparent answer which may not be an answer at all? I certainly don't like the wheedling tone, the attempt at ingratiation by the religious leaders – branded 'malice' in the gospel – and I have no wish to be tarred with this brush; yet I do want to know what claims the state has in my life...and it is not always enough to be told, 'Get used to living with tension'. The URC Statement of Nature, Faith and Order touches on this without conspiring to be particularly helpful: 'Christ gives his Church a government distinct from the government of the state. In things that affect obedience to God the Church is not subordinate to the state'. And...?

We need to understand exactly how complicated the context for this encounter actually was. The Herodians, rich supporters of the Roman puppet king Herod Antipas, favoured paying taxes to Rome. The Pharisees, as the spiritual backbone of resentment against Rome, no doubt resented having to pay it – and yet these two groups approach Jesus together here. Moreover the fact that, unlike the Temple Tax, tax to Rome was paid in coins bearing the Emperor's image and divine claims made it an affront to the first commandment. And it was collected by those branded turncoats and rip-off merchants...and tax-collectors appeared in Jesus' closest circle of friends...well, you can see why we are moving into such contentious territory. Whatever Jesus says will please one and displease the other, and any answer might put him at personal risk. Zealots were ready to assassinate collaborators – and Roman spies were ready to shop preachers of sedition.

You think that issues of taxation are fraught with problems in 2014...you know that taxation will be discussed endlessly in the run-up to the 2015 General Election...you worry that we only know a tiny part of the story relating to so-called 'tax avoidance' schemes; well, so far as money is concerned, there is nothing new under the sun. If, however, you feel that it sufficient to applaud the apparent cleverness of Jesus' answer, his deft sidestep of things which could have landed him in very hot water indeed...I don't think that it is.

The answer that he does give is ambiguous,, and has been interpreted in different ways. For some, it makes clear that we have dual loyalties, to God in spiritual matters and to the state in temporal ones. Others have said that the Herodians will have heard it in this way, but faithful Jews will have known that there is nothing that is not God's, so the Pharisees may have heard him as rejecting the tax to Rome. Or...well, others again have suggested that the avoidance of a direct answer is the real point. In this area, Jesus doesn't tell people what to think, but requires them to work things out for themselves. I have no doubt that his answer on this occasion will have sustained many a market-place discussion for hours, as people tried to get to grips with it – and maybe there is value in acknowledging that there is no cheap, monochrome wisdom when it comes to the big issues of living in this world.

I do warm towards the idea of having to work things out; I don't like the simplistic; I do believe that early or easily obtained certainties need to listen; I am not dismayed by Jesus' observation that people of faith need to be 'wise as serpents' – we need to know how things work, and we need to acknowledge that God continues to be endlessly surprising.

This is certainly the case in the thorny little reading from Isaiah. Undercurrents of foreboding lie just beneath the surface as Cyrus rises to power while Israel is languishing in exile. This apparent disaster of the rise of a ruler who worships the god Marduk and who will subdue the nations stands in stark contrast to his manifesto that promises rule by the consent of the people and religious freedom for all. And yet...Cyrus, a foreigner from another faith tradition, is marked out as God's anointed and the one through whom God will work. I would like to see a robust exegesis of this passage for our world in 2014, but I am not aware of any...please, put me right if you know of any.

I draw on this truth, however: we are only a part of the picture. There are parts of any story that we do not easily see and cannot fully comprehend. God sees the bigger picture and challenges us to see things from different perspectives – true discernment is a spiritual gift much needed in our times. The need to explore the relationship between our faith and the secular world has continued unabated since the times of Jesus...and we have not always as devoted as much time and energy to it as we should have done.

Yes, Jesus advises paying the powers of this world with money...but he also advises giving our whole lives to the one true living God: the currency of the kingdom is the way we live our lives. How does kingdom currency cash out in

this world? We face hundreds of decisions about the way that we live every day: such wide-ranging concerns as fossil fuels, fair trade, benefit claims, tax evasion, ethical investments, sweatshop labour, family relationships, foreign affairs, attitudes towards other faiths impact on us daily. Paying taxes to the state, believe it or not, was probably the easy aspect of human dilemma even in Jesus' day; living for God in this world was fraught with issues then, as now...and it should continue to occupy a great deal of our spiritual energy.