

Sunday 22nd October 2023; Benefice HC, Oswaldkirk

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

This phrase is often quoted in our times. It seems, at face value, to support the separation of “church and state,” implying that we each have a civic responsibility and a religious responsibility and that those are separate. We have duty to the state, and duty to our God. We often hear the phrase, ‘Don’t mix politics and religion!’ Some politicians have been known to tell members of the Church to stay out of state issues, sometimes at their peril, as St. Thomas Beckett discovered in the 12th century when he came into conflict with the King, Henry II, who has been incorrectly reported as saying, ‘Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest!’.

This interpretation of the words of Jesus in reply to the question that has come down to us to justify this attitude is incorrect. First, in the ancient world there was no concept of a separation of civic and religious life, for Caesar wasn’t just the secular head of state there, he was proclaimed to be a god too, ruling over everything. Jesus does not deny or challenge this situation. Just or unjust, fair, or unfair, the system was the system, symbolically captured by the image of Caesar on the coin. It was a reminder that everything in the empire belonged to Caesar, and everything and everyone had a place because of Caesar. Jesus answers the testing question, by saying that paying the tax is to simply give back to Caesar what Caesar gave; an empire to live in, work to do, food to eat, money to earn, the “fruit” of the system. Jesus’ response confounds them by saying the ruling Government should be given

what they are due by law, but he goes on to say, as the giver and sustainer of all life, God must be given what God is due too; total and joyful obedience in everything and acknowledging this in the words of King Solomon, words which we say in our churches every week, “All things come of thee, O God, and of thine own do we give to thee.”

This isn't a call for separation of state and religion or the establishment of a dual responsibility to God and state. This is a call to first give all that we have and all that we are to God, to love God first and then our neighbour.

These words of Jesus confront us with a question about our obligations. We are constantly aware of the duties we are obligated to perform to our government, and even if we don't enjoy those duties, most of us recognize their importance and are very careful to keep them. We are careful to vote, to respond when called upon to perform jury duty; pay our taxes and be law-abiding citizens brought up to believe that these are some of the most important obligations we can fulfil in our society.

But then Jesus challenges us to ask ourselves what about our even greater obligations to God? Are we as careful to render to Him the things that we owe to Him as we are to render our obligations to our government? How careful are we to even know what it is that God says we owe Him? And what does it say about us when we are so concerned to carefully perform the duties that a temporal, while almost completely ignoring the even greater duties and obligations that God demands of us?

This morning's passage touches on this whole matter. It says we should be careful to perform our duties as citizens of the earthly government under which God has placed us,

but we should be even more careful to perform the greater duties and obligations we owe to the God of the universe, the God who made us for Himself.

To put it another way, we shouldn't fail to render to earthly state and rulers the things that are right and appropriate, but we should make even more certain that we render to God the things that are God's and above all other obligations we have in life to serve Him and love our fellow human beings and care for Creation.

In doing so, Jesus gives this word of hope and calling. Yes, we give to the nation-state, but we also give to God the things that are God's. Caesar might have an empire, but God created the universe. The days of Caesar's realm are numbered, but God's realm is eternal.

Jesus reminds us we are part of a reality much bigger than Caesar's or anyone else's empire. God put His stamp not on a coin, but on the earth by making humanity in the image and likeness of His very self. Our very existence, everything that we are, not just what we own or earn or contribute to society, belongs to Him and it is to Him we are called to render our hearts and minds in thanks and praise.

As we have heard in the news, our coinage will soon start changing to show the head of King Charles to remind us of our new beloved monarch and his sovereignty over us as Head of State and Church and to whom we will render our loyalty and love, for the time he is King.

Our Gospel message today obliges us to consider that the eternal name and image of God may not be on our coins

but is on our souls, and that we should give all that we are back to God, to let Him have our whole being.

Thanks be to God. Amen