

Sermon preached by the Bishop of Portsmouth,
The Rt Revd Christopher Foster

Borough of Gosport Civic Service
St. Faith's, Lee on the Solent,

Sunday 17 July 2011

Matthew 22:15-22

Our Mayor has just read what is possibly the most misunderstood and misinterpreted of all the accounts of Jesus' teaching and life. That makes it, perhaps, an appropriate choice of reading for a civic service since Councillors and Officers in local government sometimes feel themselves misunderstood or misinterpreted. There is a resonance, then, both in the choice of this passage and in the familiarity of Jesus' exhortation in the traditional words, "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things which are God's."

As if life could be separated into bits; this part for the emperor, that part for God. Life just is not like that, neat and boxed, nor are our obligations and privileges that simple, even though sometimes we wish they were. Jesus has a habit of reminding us that simple, apparently straightforward answers rarely cope with the complexities of real people and actual events.

Who is my neighbour? someone asked Jesus, who responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan suggesting it is not always the Levite or priest who does the compassionate and neighbourly act to the man mugged at the roadside, but the despised foreigner, 'untrustworthy' outsider or newcomer, the Samaritan. How often shall I forgive someone, up to seven times? someone asked Jesus, and he replies seventy times seven. And the parable of the son returning after squandering his inheritance, taken as a cash sum in advance and lost so that he ate pigswill, shows a still loving father welcoming him home with a lavish party.

These stories are not just about one Samaritan, a priest and a Levite, but about the human capacity to have a warm and open heart or a cold heart and a closed mind; nor about forgiving 490 times and keeping count; nor about one human father, but about how we can behave and act as generously as our heavenly father.

This morning we are not told by Jesus to try harder to make the right distinctions between what is Caesar's or the State or the government's on the one hand, and what is God's on the other, because we are invited to ask a deeper question. What does the Lord require of us? Micah, as we read in the first reading, responds, "to act justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God."

Our experience in our nation over the last fortnight gives a new perspective on these three ways in which any of us and all of us live up to God's call, or do not.

To act justly. I imagine we may in time find that some have fallen short of justice both by illegal actions probably, and almost certainly by behaviour which common decency judges unjust.

To love kindness. It is clear beyond doubt to me at least that simple compassion and respect have been relegated sometimes not just to the bottom of the priority list but off it.

To walk humbly. Well it is hard to credit how important some people have thought they are. Newspaper editors, owners and reporters, politicians and the police; those we want to trust and ought to be able to trust.

To walk humbly with God. Any understanding of answering to God or a higher authority seems conspicuously absent.

But this morning we have come together because we wish to renew our commitment in this Borough to act justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. Councillors and officers, representatives of the community and charities, the armed forces, the Church and other religious groupings, and so many others besides. We are here not just because we have recently seen how others can fall short of the expectations we have, but because we know that we can fall short of the trust placed in us by our electors, by our community and by God. To those here who, like the Mayor, myself and many others, are called to positions and roles of leadership and authority I invite us not to gloat on others failings, but remember all that is entrusted to us, and to be just, kind, and humble.

It is possible to read this gospel account and fall into the trap of seeing Jesus as a good politician, a smart operator, with a quick mind, and a clever way with words. The Pharisees were plotting to trap Jesus, so they send their younger colleagues and protégées, the Herodians, to flatter Jesus. Ironically, they try to butter him up and soften his defences but actually every word they say is true, albeit sneering. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the word of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no-one, for you do not regard people with partiality." Absolutely. Jesus has integrity. They go on to ask a clever question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?", knowing that if Jesus says yes then most of the public will be disillusioned because they hate paying tax to an occupying ruler, and if he says no then he is guilty of treason and will probably be arrested.

Jesus escapes the trap by asking to be shown a coin, drawing attention to Caesar's image on it, and saying, "Give to the emperor what is his and to God what is God's." It is a brilliant answer. Even the young Herodians think so and are, we read, amazed. It is also a profound, deep response, and we do well in public service and in politics to pay attention to deeper issues and to seek not just skin deep or surface understandings. We are to be concerned not just with the presenting issues, like the image on the coin, the immediate impact of the decision and the short-term consequences. We ask what are the deeper concerns, consequences and outcomes.

Jesus reminds his questioners that the coin bears the image of Caesar, and is therefore his. Humans bear the image of God, for we are made in his image and likeness. Give to Caesar then, what is his; what belongs to a passing, temporary, human ruler with short-lived and loaned authority. Give to God, he goes on, what is God's; and what bears God's image is us – and God's image we bear always. The coin shows visibly to whom it belongs. We are to show visibly to whom we belong, and not a part of us sometimes, but every bit of us always. Humans bear God's image wherever they live and are, in the social, economic, political or religious realm. We belong to God. Our loyalties and priorities do not switch.

So our highest priority is never to our employer, nor to our political party, nor even to our electors. We have responsibilities to all of these, and to our families, our church, our nation, but none trumps our first loyalty to the one whose image we bear.

That is the profound truth which Jesus tells us in this misunderstood passage. If we heeded this message then, perhaps, we should not have endured recently this ghastly insight into the dangers of bent priorities in a twisted society. If we heed this message we shall better serve each other in our Borough and society, as well as our God, as we act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.