

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 227

Sunday 22nd October 2023

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to Cutting Edge Camelot this Sunday.

Scripture Passages

Isaiah 45: 1-7

Thus says the LORD to his anointed,

to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him

and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him –

and the gates shall not be closed:

² I will go before you

and level the mountains,

I will break in pieces the doors of bronze

and cut through the bars of iron,

³ I will give you the treasures of darkness

and riches hidden in secret places,

so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,

the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob,

and Israel my chosen,

I call you by your name,

I surname you, though you do not know me.

⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other;

besides me there is no god.

I arm you,
 though you do not know me,
⁶ so that they may know,
 from the rising of the sun and from the west,
that there is no one besides me;
 I am the LORD, and there is no other.
⁷ I form light and create darkness,
 I make weal and create woe;
 I the LORD do all these things.

Matthew 22: 15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. ¹⁷ “Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ “Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius.

²⁰ And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

²¹ They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

²² When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left Him and went their way.

Reflection

Our gospel reading this morning contains one of Jesus’ most well known phrases ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’

We probably also know that this saying comes in the context of a trap which has been set for Jesus by His opponents. As our translation puts it, they plot how they might entangle Him in his words.

For Jesus has been asked whether it is right to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, Caesar, or not.

If Jesus answers that, yes, they should pay taxes to Caesar, then it is likely that He will lose popular standing and influence as His potential supporters in Jerusalem were bitterly resentful of Roman occupation and rule.

On the other hand, if Jesus says that, no, they should not pay taxes to Caesar then His enemies could denounce Him as a potential revolutionary and insurrectionist to the Roman authorities and He could be arrested.

Although this specific context of Roman occupation of ancient Judaea has long since passed away, the issues raised by this question are still very much relevant to our faith and lives as Christians today.

We may indeed accept that taxes, along with death, are one of the two inevitabilities of life. Nevertheless, the extent to which the state (or indeed any other human authority) must always be obeyed is one which will, at times, for all of us require careful consideration and prayer. Are there times when our Christian conscience requires that we act in a different way to the one that is required of us by an external authority?

In countries such as our own we are accustomed to our own conscience being respected and given freedom. We should be grateful for this because this has not always been so at all times and in all places. Indeed, we can see such freedom as being a result of our Christian heritage.

On the other hand, all of us recently experienced many of the freedoms which we simply took for granted restricted during the pandemic. Who

would have thought that we would not have been allowed the freedom at that time to gather together in a church and to worship God there?

And sometimes difficult decisions of conscience arise for us in the course of our everyday working lives. Before I was ordained, I was in a business meeting where the speaker said bluntly 'All that matters is the bottom line (i.e. making a profit). Anyone who does not believe this should leave this meeting now.'

Should I have said something at that time like 'But what about being in business to serve and help others? What about professional and ethical standards?' I did, however, wonder whether I had any place in an organisation which demanded that all its employees subscribed to the belief that money is all that matters. And later I did indeed issue a challenge to this viewpoint.

But these cases all raise for us the question of whether there comes a point when Caesar is asking us for something that really belongs to God. At what point do we need to say 'No' to the claims and demands of human authorities?

People have sometimes wondered whether, despite such a memorable phrase, Jesus was not simply evading the trap that had been set for Him and failing to give a direct answer to a straightforward question. Does this phrase have any actual substance? Can it help us to make specific decisions one way or another?

However, if we reflect more deeply on what Jesus said, we will find that He is not simply producing a memorable phrase to get Himself out of a trap but that these words have a very definite content and can be applied very specifically.

Jesus tells us to render to God what belongs to God. So what is it that belongs to God? Elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus reminds of the Old Testament command to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds. Indeed, He tells us that this is the most important command of all (see Matthew 22: 37-38).

And love is connected with both worship and service. Elsewhere, Jesus quotes the Old Testament again to declare that we should worship and serve God alone (see Matthew 4:10). So, what belongs to God is our love and also our ultimate loyalty, service and worship.

So, if Caesar or any other form of human authority begins to compete with these claims of God on our lives by asking for our worship, then this is going too far. It is asking us to give to Caesar what we can only properly give to God.

For the early Christians, Jesus' answer was anything but vague and evasive. For it gave them very clear guidance in the most extreme challenges of life. The early Christians did indeed pay their taxes and in all other respects but one they were renowned as being model citizens.

And what was this respect? The issue came when the Roman emperors claimed to be gods in their own right and to demand worship from all their subjects. For Christians, reflecting on Jesus's words about where God and Caesar stood in relation to one another, they could not do this. So, they could not and would not give the emperor their worship. Many of them were prepared to suffer persecution and even death as a result of this refusal.

That was clear. But in our times this dividing line between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God is less obvious. In our secular society there will be very few if any occasions when we are explicitly required to give our worship to another human being. However, the demand may be made

in more implicit ways. And this can be, in some ways, even more challenging.

On the other hand, our Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah reminds us that finding God's way forward in our lives is at times far from straightforward. Isaiah's prophecy concerns the Persian king Cyrus. Cyrus was a pagan king. His allegiance to God was at best very mixed. But could Cyrus nevertheless be a force for good, even an instrument in the hands of God?

For even though he exercised the full force of his military power, Cyrus was, by the standards of his day, a very enlightened ruler. He fully accepted the right of the people of God who had been exiled by the Babylonians to go back to their own country and to worship God in their own way in Jerusalem.

So Isaiah can speak of Cyrus as anointed and called by God to be, in his military conquests, an agent of God, even though an unwitting one. So even if we find it hard fully to respect someone who has been placed in authority over us, he or she may nevertheless be a channel through which God's purposes are worked out.

So how do we live in a world that is far from straightforward? Jesus' words do not give us a simple rule which can be applied in each and every dilemma which we face in life.

They do, however, point us to the need to keep our love and worship for God alive and growing. True freedom, after all, is not just about freedom from external restrictions and constraints placed upon us by various forms of human authority. Rather it is about an inner freedom which we can enjoy whatever our external circumstances might be.

In Jesus' ministry, the story of Martha and Mary illustrates this graphically. Martha is distracted and worried about the many preparations which she needed to make for Jesus' visit. On the other hand, her sister Mary simply sits at Jesus' feet listening to Him and drinking in all His words. In this, Mary is demonstrating that the first love and allegiance of her heart belongs to God. And this, Jesus tells Martha, cannot be taken away from her. The worship and love she gives to Jesus brings her into an inner freedom which outward demands cannot touch.

So, there is a challenge for us to develop our inner lives of worship to God. Although 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's', does not give us the answer to each decision which we face it does provide us with a clear invitation and challenge to dedicate ourselves more deeply and fully to God, to give God the love and worship and love of our hearts which rightly belongs to God. And as our inner life of worship develops so too will our sensitivity to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Then when we come to those difficult decisions when human authorities seem to be demanding too much from us, we will be able prayerfully and in each individual case to determine the limits beyond which Caesar cannot and should not go.

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- Developing our love for God and knowing the limits of what human authorities can demand of us
- Giving thanks for the harvest
- For Israel, Gaza and the Middle East
- Ongoing war in the Ukraine

- Those whom we know who are facing illnesses of all kinds and have recently been bereaved
- For Elliscombe House in Higher Holton and its residents
- For teachers and children of North Cadbury church school

Hymn

A hymn set for this Sunday is ‘Christ triumphant, ever reigning.’

Services for this week and next

Sunday 22 nd October	8.00 am Communion, Blackford
Sunday 22 nd October	9.30 am Communion, South Cadbury
Sunday 22 nd October	9.30 am Matins, Compton Pauncefoot
Sunday 22 nd October	9.30 am Morning Worship, North Cheriton
Sunday 22 nd October	11.00 am Communion, North Cadbury
Sunday 22 nd October	11.00 am Communion (with baptism), Holton
Sunday 22 nd October	11.00 am Sunday Worship, Yarlington
Sunday 22 nd October	6.30 pm Evening Service, Galhampton
Sunday 29 th October	9.30 am Family Service, North Cheriton
Sunday 29 th October	11.00 am Communion, Maperton
Sunday 29 th October	11.00 am Harvest Service, Bratton Seymour
Sunday 29 th October	4.00 pm Evensong, Galhampton

Excalibur

Excalibur is back in paper form. It contains details of Camelot people, a record of baptisms, weddings and funerals undertaken through the church

in the Camelot Parishes. The October edition of Excalibur has now been published online at camelotparishes.co.uk.

The Parish Office

If Rob is not in the Office during normal office hours please contact him via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5: 2)