

“Of God...and the Emperor”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on October 16th 2011 (18th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 22: 15-22

Perhaps the best starting point...perhaps the very best starting point for this morning's reflection is to remind us that the Bible—despite its immense bulk—the Bible does not contain much by way of explicit instruction as to the appropriate way in which society ought to be arranged and governed. Oh yes: we see all sorts of leaders in action, ranging from charismatic leaders without formal title such as Moses and Joshua, succeeded by those designated “Judges”, eventually leading to the establishment of the office of Kingship in ancient Israel, an office which God appears to permit with great reluctance. And yes: there are fragments in some of the New Testament letters in which Paul (or one of the other Apostles) advises Christians to obey the ruling authorities. Beyond that: there isn't a whole lot upon which to draw. Indeed: if you're looking for the sort of presentation Plato provides in the *Republic* or Aristotle provides in his *Politics*...well, frankly: if you are looking for that sort of thing, you had best turn either to Plato or Aristotle, because you are not going to find what you are looking for in either the Old or New Testaments. And that, you see, may well explain...

...that may well explain why it is that this morning's scripture text—that brief tantalizing reading from Matthew (although it can also be found in pretty much the same form in Mark and in Luke)...that may well explain why it is that this morning's scripture text has resonated with such power over the centuries. *Render unto the Emperor...render unto Caesar...the things that are Caesar's...but render unto God the things that are God's*. A text with as rich a history of interpretation as any we are likely to bump into as we peruse our Bibles...but one that first needs to be understood in terms of its original setting: it's original setting in the life of Christ.

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That the original setting involves a wee bit of danger for our Lord is not to be doubted. This episode is part of a larger unit of episodes that take place in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' act of defiance in the Jerusalem Temple, when he overturns the tables of the money-changers. These episodes depict Jesus sparring with different parties from within the leadership circles of ancient Judea; at best they ask him questions to satisfy their curiosity—who is this Galilean?; at worst they are trying to trip him up...trying to provoke him into making a dangerous error in judgment.

And it is difficult to escape the impression that this present episode is, in fact, an example of the Judean religious leadership tempting Jesus into a potentially deadly response. The key hint that the question about paying taxes to the Roman Empire comes with fairly malicious intent has to do with the fact that the disciples of the Pharisees bring with them to Jesus a group with whom they are not normally

associated: members of the party attached to the court of King Herod. Which is potentially deadly to Jesus since the question they ask him is one where he may well find himself damned *regardless* of the answer he provides. On the one hand, if he nonchalantly says: “Of course you should pay taxes...” the more militant members of the crowd (including some of the more radically nationalist Pharisees) may quickly label Jesus as a collaborator with a foreign occupier; and we know what happens to collaborators in colonial outposts such as ancient Judea. On the other hand, if Jesus adamantly insists that loyal Jews ought not to cooperate with Rome—even at the level of paying taxes to Rome—then the Herodians will be handed a key piece of information to demonstrate that Jesus (having already acted rebelliously in the Temple in the realm of religion) is now encouraging his followers to act rebelliously in the political realm, by refusing to pay taxes to their Roman overlords. Do you see how dangerous a question this was? Do you see why Jesus needed to keep his wits about him as he replied?

In the event, Christ is depicted as doing just that, answering with remarkable cleverness. He asks for a sample of the coin with which the tax would be paid; asks whose image is on that coin (most scholars presume it would bear the image of Tiberius Caesar who succeeded Augustus) and proceeds to make it clear that there is nothing wrong with returning the coin to Caesar since, after all, it's *his* coin bearing *his* image! (Interestingly, the Greek verb used here has Jesus saying not that they should give the coin to the Emperor but precisely that they should give it *back* to the Emperor!) But having adjudicated the destination of the coin with such decisiveness, he then proceeds to make the larger point: having given to the Emperor that which does, in fact, belong to the Emperor, those who seek to be faithful to Israel's God ought to return to God everything that belongs to God. And since the God of Israel is the God who made the heavens and the earth, the obligation to give back to God is a boundless obligation, touching every facet of life. No wonder...no wonder those who asked a question that provoked such a shrewd response had no choice but *to marvel as they left him and went away*. However! Lest we become too caught up...too caught up in *our* marvelling at Christ's fancy footwork and clever retort...it's here that we need to pull back from its initial setting in the Gospel, to ponder some of the implications of this suggestive little text, specifically the way in which this text has tended to be heard down through the centuries.

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It is, to be honest, a text that raises far more questions than it answers. And yet, it has nevertheless exerted an influence both wide and deep. Remember: remember what I noted at the outset, namely that the Bible does not contain any developed treatise on the shaping of society and the role of the governing powers in the shape of society. Which may help to explain the huge influence of this text...a text which for all of its vagueness...

...notice, for example, that Jesus' pithy little response doesn't really give us any firm guidelines as to where the things of Caesar begin and where they end!...

...given the relative dearth of any more explicit texts on these matters, it's not hard to see why this one, despite the only suggestive nature of the guidance it provides, has been hugely influential, playing a far from insignificant role in the development of the characteristic **Church/State separation** that has been a reality in the Christian West, even during that most "religious" epoch—the Middle Ages—when the Church, with remarkable consistency, put Kings in their place when they tried to cross the line between secular and religious authority. And while I could, no doubt, spend many hours this morning outlining the history of this text's interpretation, let me share with you one quote from the great 19th century English historian, **Lord Acton**: a quote which—in many ways—provides an apt summary of the way in which these words of Jesus have been heard down through the centuries:

Acton writes: *Those words of Jesus about Caesar...those words give to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed and bounds it had never acknowledged. Gave to civil power—gave to the governing authorities—both a sacredness it had never enjoyed **and** bounds it had never acknowledged. To which Acton adds this insight: *Jesus' words were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom.* The repudiation of absolutism...in other words the rejection of the view that Caesar was all-powerful! The inauguration of freedom...the creation of civic space where human persons are free to pursue their goals apart from the strict supervision of the Emperor and his minions! And while it is possible to debate the accuracy of that interpretation of this text, what cannot be debated is the extent to which this text, over the centuries, has been understood in some such way: placing a strict limit on the extent to which the State—even a Christian State—ought to seek to control the lives of its people.*

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The obvious contrast...the unavoidable contrast...is between such a view, and views more characteristically seen over the past 1400 years from within the Islamic world. Such contrasts, I hasten to note, need always to be made with great caution; too often we have been subjected—and are still in far too many places subjected—to comparisons between one faith and another which amount to little more than an attempt to show how much better "we" are than "they". That's why I have placed, in the front of the sanctuary this morning, a poster that normally hangs on the wall of my study: one that demonstrates quite nicely the way in which the commandment to love the neighbour is articulated throughout a wide range of the world's religions, including both Christianity and Islam. And yet...and yet!

What cannot be denied is the extent to which Jesus' words in this morning's scripture rest uneasily within the world of Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a great (almost terrifyingly erudite) Islamic scholar, in an introductory portrait of Islam, acknowledges that *the relations between Islam and political life is a very complex one.* That having been said, he insists (and I quote) that *Islam has **never** separated religion from politics in the sense of dividing the kingdoms of God and Caesar.* Noting that *the prophet himself was at once the religious **and** political leader of the first Islamic community,*

Nasr cautions that Muslims cannot (and ought not) *accept in principle the separation of religion from the domain of public life which would then become secularized as it has in the West to an ever greater degree since the Renaissance.*

And I am reminded...as I always find myself reminded at a juncture such as this...[apologies to those who have heard this before]...reminded of an incident that took place at Knox in Spring 1996, when we first devoted our Lenten Lecture series to the theme of inter-faith conversation. To say that the 7 lectures in that series were well received is something of an understatement; it was an exceptionally successful venture. But there was one blip...one precise moment...when things threatened to become less than peaceful. That took place when our speaker on Islam—the, then, Islamic chaplain at the University of Victoria—commented on the creeping decadence he perceived as a grave threat to Western culture. Viewing that decadence from an Islamic perspective, he made the following statement: *We believe that we understand the causes of your problem...and we believe that we have the answer.*

Suffice it to say that I can still hear, some 15 years later, the distinctively audible hiss that went up as soon as he finished that statement. You could have cut the air with a knife!!!

I tell that story...I tell that story not because I am unsympathetic to those who wonder and worry as to where the West's 500+ year journey into secularism will eventually lead...but because, as a child of freedom, I deeply cherish the freedom afforded by our public space, a freedom which—of course—can be misused and yet a freedom which, by insisting upon a limit to the Emperor's domain, permits human beings to flourish in countless ways. On the one hand, I am certain that any meaningful dialogue between Christianity and Islam—in other words any conversation that hopes to move beyond platitudes—will have no choice but to address questions of political-theology. On the other hand, I worry that the church—including our United Church of Canada—sometimes takes for granted the legacy of freedom that our Christian forebears bequeathed to us, as well as the unique responsibility that may well fall to us as those who ought to be able to articulate not only what is wrong but also what is right with that rich legacy.

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As I ponder this morning's text, I am also struck by the almost casual shrug with which Jesus hands back the coin bearing the image of Tiberius Caesar. To my way of thinking, attempts at reconceptualising Jesus as a largely political figure founder right there. Indeed, there is a school of thought that tends to interpret Jesus' attitude, in this morning's episode, as bordering on contempt for anything that even vaguely smacks of political participation let alone political agitation. I'm not sure I would go quite that far. And yet!

Context matters! And the context in which Jesus hands that coin back to the Emperor was a context that many of his fellow Judeans found intolerable: a context in

which they remained under the thumb of an increasingly arrogant foreign power. By contrast, Jesus appears almost nonchalant in his attitude toward Rome. It's almost as if he's telling his followers: *Whatever! Give back to Caesar the things that truly belong to him, so that you can get on with the things that actually matter to God!*

The contrast with our own tendencies could not stand out more sharply. A wonderfully written, wonderfully thoughtful, but somewhat melancholy article in the September issue of the United Church Observer, speaks of the decline of four once thriving West Toronto churches, churches whose hard-times parallel the hard-times many urban churches now find themselves in right across Canada. As the article shrewdly points out: *Up until the middle years of the last century [in other words the late 40s and early 50s], up until them middle years of the last century, churches like the four on Annette Street pretty much guaranteed themselves a central role in the life of the community by offering a full range of services....When churches began to lobby governments to take over the tasks of social care...they helped to seal their own fate. Governments provided more services, and churches eventually lost their central place in the community.*

And no...I am not so naïve as to think we can turn the clocks back...nor am I carrying a brief for the good old days of, say, the 1930s. Nevertheless: the fact that the very big governments of 2011 appear to be no more capable of addressing the current crisis of the Great Recession than the very small governments of 1931 in addressing the crisis of the Great Depression, surely ought to make us think twice about the wisdom of further enlargement to Caesar's domain. Where does the power of the State find its outer limit? Where ought those boundaries to be erected? More fundamentally: what role is left to the Church? Having handed over—to the Emperor, to the State—so much of the responsibility which once-upon-a-time resided with us, what **is** our role? Is it exclusively that of side-line critic: a voice from the bleachers calling-out the government (in other words, pontificating on the life of some other institution) whenever that other institution fails to perform in the way in which "our" institution thinks it ought to perform? Or do we have a role to play beyond that...a distinctive witness without which our world will somehow be profoundly diminished?

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Then Jesus said to them: *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's*, words which are both provocative and frustrating: provocative because they open up all kinds of possibilities, frustrating because they fail to spell things out with even minimal clarity. For that very reason: words that may seem especially elusive in the midst of the very real crisis in which our world now finds itself. With growing economic sclerosis, on the one hand, and a growing—and utterly unpredictable—"Occupy Wall Street" movement, on the other, we ought not to pretend that we have any idea as to some of the ways in which the Church may now be called to live out the injunction to give to Caesar that which is Caesar's so that we can get on with the work of giving to God the things that are God's. And yet, at

a bare minimum—at a bare minimum, surely our unique witness must include at least three things.

Must include a witness of **gratitude**: gratitude offered to God for the gift of Creation's bounty, a witness the Church is uniquely enabled to offer given our peculiarity as a people who are still willing to *name* God, let alone journey with God! Surely our witness must include such gratitude...and surely it will also need to incorporate a witness of **generosity**: a continued (perhaps enlarged) willingness to share with others bounty which we, of all people, must surely recognize to be ours as a gift rather than as an entitlement. And finally...finally, the Church's peculiar witness, I hope and pray, will include a witness to the essential rightness of a way of life that includes the gift of **human freedom**: freedom that can only flourish and will only flourish in those times and place where the Emperor recognizes the limits beyond which he ought never to transgress.

Friends in Christ: may we, who surely do know our own limits, never hesitate—with God's good grace and in the power of God's Spirit—never hesitate to seek to surpass those limits. As those in whom Christ's word richly dwells, may our lives truly become a song of praise! May it be so! Amen!!

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