

**Sermon for Sunday, October 22, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

Stories  
are the way we've heard most  
from Jesus  
these last few weeks, parables  
about ungrateful tenants  
and disobedient sons  
and a royal wedding reception.  
Some stories  
are clearer than others,  
but each time,  
we've had to extract the meaning,  
to try to work it out ourselves  
from the middle of characters and descriptions and plots.  
But it's finally over, for now at least.  
Jesus gets asked a question  
and he gives  
a straightforward answer.  
Kind of straightforward, anyway. At least it's not a story.

The Pharisees, the religious leaders and academics,  
are ready  
to get rid of Jesus. He's getting too popular, he's making trouble. And so they decide  
to try to trap him, to ask a question  
which no matter which way he answers  
he will be in danger – one way  
and he'll be charged with blasphemy,  
the other  
treason.  
Faces shining with innocence, they ask,  
“Teacher, we know that you are sincere,  
and teach the way of God in accordance with truth,  
and show deference to no one;  
for you do not regard people with partiality.  
Tell us, then, what you think.  
Is it lawful  
to pay taxes to the emperor

or not?"

Now of course, if Jesus says no, it is not lawful,  
then he could be up on charges of treason  
accused of subverting the power  
of the Roman  
Empire.

But if he says it is lawful, then he could be accused of idolatry  
by the Jewish officials  
on the basis of the image of the emperor  
on the Roman coins,  
and the tendency of the Romans  
to consider their emperors  
as gods.

And so  
whichever way Jesus answers,  
he is caught;  
whichever way,  
he is subject  
to arrest.

And that is what  
the Pharisees  
are relying on.

But they don't know  
Jesus.

Because, as we know from his parables,  
Jesus is not particularly known  
for answering with a simple  
'yes'  
or 'no.'

"Who is my neighbor?"

someone asked,  
and he went off with a long story of a traveler attacked by bandits.

"What authority do you have to heal and teach?"

and he told the story of the disobedient sons, and of the landowner with his vineyard.

And so I guess  
we shouldn't be surprised  
that even though this time  
he doesn't tell a story,  
he still doesn't give them  
a nice neat answer

to their question.

“Take a coin,” he says, “and look at it. Whose picture is on it?”

“The emperor's,” they answer.

Well then, give to the emperor  
the things that are the emperor's,  
and give to God  
the things  
that are God's.”

Is this an answer?

It sound like it . . . until you begin to think about it. Should we pay taxes?

Give to the government  
what belongs to the government,  
and give to God  
what belongs to God.

All Jesus has done  
is push the question  
back on his questioners  
and back, in turn,  
on us.

What belongs to God?

And what belongs  
to the government?

Of course, an easy way to address this text  
especially at this time of year,  
would be to talk about stewardship, and to talk about it  
particularly  
in terms of money.

And the simple lesson is,  
just as the government expects us today our taxes,  
because that's how the government can afford to get its work done,  
so God expects us to give to the church  
because that's how the God can get God's work done.

And the standard of giving  
set out in scripture  
is ten percent.

Ten percent of everything we earn

given to the work of God.  
Leaving us with ninety percent  
to live on ourselves.

But there's more to these words of Jesus, I think,  
than just a simple lesson about stewardship,  
Because to limit this passage to stewardship  
is to read it too narrowly, to let it say less  
than Jesus really means.  
I don't think  
this is just about  
who you give money to,  
though that's part of it.  
Its about how we live in this world  
which is both God's  
and ours,  
how we juggle the relationship between God and government,  
and maybe even  
between church  
and state.  
And there are no easy formulas  
for that.  
To answer those questions  
we have to dig deeper  
into the scriptures, to dig deeper  
for an understanding  
of the respective places  
of God and government  
in our lives.

What belongs to God?  
And what belongs  
to the government?

When you go back to the very beginning of the Bible, to the story  
which sets the scene for everything else that follows, you find  
the story of creation.

“In the beginning, God created  
the heavens

and the earth.”

And on it goes from there, the sun and moon and stars, the oceans and dry land, plants of every kind, fish and birds and animals, and finally, human beings.

This is not about asserting  
creationism

over evolution. The point of this story, the point of the story of creation is not that all creation was made in 7 twenty-four days,  
but that God

created it. However it happened, however those seven periods of time are understood, God is responsible. God is the creator. And, as a psalm puts it,  
“The earth is the Lord's and all that dwells therein.”

What belongs to God?

Everything.

Everything.

There is not one single thing in this world, no blade of grass,  
no tiny bird,  
no single human being  
which does not,  
in the end,  
owe its life, its very existence,  
to God.

Give to the emperor  
what belongs to the emperor  
and give to God  
what belongs to God.

And if what belongs to God is . . .

everything,

then everything about our lives  
becomes an offering to God.

How we live

is the way

we worship God,

at work, at home, when we're doing the shopping,

when we're clearing the house,

when we're out with friends,

all of that

is our life lived

in the presence of God.

And it was from this idea of the whole of life belonging to God  
that the people of the Old Testament  
chose to give away ten percent of their income  
and, for the farmers of the crops they grew and the animals they raised  
they gave ten percent  
back to God,  
in thanksgiving.  
A token sign of their thankfulness  
for all God had given them.

Give to the emperor  
what belongs to the emperor  
and give to God  
what belongs to God.  
So if everything  
belongs to God  
then what is left  
for the emperor?  
Or, in modern language, what belongs to the government?

In the book of Romans  
Paul tells the people of Rome  
that they are to obey  
their government. To pay their taxes. Why?  
Because then the government  
is able to do  
the work of God  
in this world.  
You may never have thought of the government  
as an instrument of God,  
but biblical tradition  
says that it is.  
It is,  
if it upholds  
the priorities of God, the values of God,  
the passion and justice and mercy of God.  
And it is our job  
is to support it

in doing that.

That doesn't mean  
writing the government a blank check,  
or simply assuming that because it is the government  
everything it does is right.

It means us holding the government  
to God's standards.

Us demanding  
that the decisions of our lawmakers  
reflect the priorities of God,  
priorities of justice and mercy, a passion for the needy and the powerless,  
a passion for peace.

As Christians, our calling  
is to hold our government accountable  
and to support it  
in carrying out  
the work of God.

We do that  
by talking to our lawmakers, letting them know our views and our commitments,  
by asking them the difficult questions,  
and, in this democratic system, by voting.

I'm not going to tell you how to vote, but I am going to tell you  
to vote.

It is part of your calling  
as a Christian, a follower of Christ.

The separation of church and state  
was put in place  
to prevent religious persecution  
in the name of good government.

It was never intended  
to push religion  
out of the public arena, to silence  
the voices

It is our duty and our calling  
as citizens of the United States  
and citizens of heaven  
to do all we can  
to make our government  
a worthy servant of the God who made all things.

This is radical stuff.  
But Jesus was no conservative.  
Giving to the emperor what belongs to the emperor,  
and to God what belongs to God  
is not about chopping life up  
into separate  
manageable  
little pieces,  
God over on this side,  
the government over on the other,  
but acknowledging that the whole earth is God's and all that is in it,  
government included,  
and that our calling  
is to live our whole lives  
political and non-political alike  
in service and thanksgiving  
to God.