

Politics & Religion

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22*

I am sure we have all heard the old adage, “If you want to avoid conflict, don’t talk about religion or politics!” Well today we are going to dive right in to both. When I was first beginning my career in ministry, a person who was the head of a large company was visiting with me and said, “Daryl, I think you should read this book. I think it will help you a lot in your career, it certainly helped me.”

He gave me a book which I believe was titled The Politics of Business. At first, I thought, “Politics in the Church?” surely that doesn’t happen, does it? What good would knowing politics do for me as a minister?

Today’s Gospel is one of the few places in the New Testament that there is a mention of, or even a faint allusion to, the Roman Empire and its Caesar. That’s really rather remarkable considering that Judea was suffering under the heel of Rome. All of the New Testament was written in a politically repressive situation and yet there is little concern about, or direct mention of that political context.

So the first thing we might notice in this Sunday’s assigned text from Matthew 22 is that Jesus is not the one to bring up the subject of payment of taxes to the emperor. This is a trick, test question by Jesus’ critics the Pharisees who seek to trip him up in a controversy that may bring down the wrath of the Roman authorities (which, of course, they ultimately did in Jesus’ crucifixion.)

And we should be reminded that crucifixion was a peculiarly Roman invention, used frequently against any Jew who dared to instigate rebellion against the Empire.

Anyone who attempts to argue that Jesus was “nonpolitical” must come to terms with his death. Why would the Romans have gone to the trouble to crucify Jesus if he presented no political threat to them? “Messiah” is a military/political designation and Jesus followers applied it to him.

So his critics send some first year theology students in an attempt to entrap Jesus by asking him a contentious political question: "Jesus, ought we pay taxes to Caesar?" It is interesting to note that Jesus' pockets are empty. Someone produces a coin with the idolatrous image of Caesar stamped upon it.

"Whose picture is on the coin?" asks Jesus.

"Caesar," they reply.

"Well you give to Caesar what he owns, but take care, give to God what God owns," says Jesus.

That's about as close as Jesus comes to a theology of government.

It's an answer that raises a question: What belongs to God? It was an answer known by every faithful Jewish person who witnessed this interrogation. "The earth belongs to the Lord and everything on the earth." (Psalm 24:1) You are God's property. That's Option 3. God created, therefore owns everything. Not much left for Caesar! In this exchange, Jesus explodes a rather narrow debate about taxes into a holy matter of worship. Whom do you trust in life and death, to whom do you owe your ultimate allegiance? In the answer to that question, we discover truly Christian politics.

Christianity has had friction with every politics in which it found itself, including the very first state where the faith was born (as we have read in this Sunday's Gospel). Elsewhere (Romans 13:1) Paul says, "Obey the governing authorities because they are appointed by and accountable to God." In other words, the governing authorities, for all their pompousness, are lackies for God. You are accountable for your actions to the governing authorities, whereas the governing authorities are answerable to God!

Yet along the way, North American Christians bought into the erroneous notion that we had at last created a culture (democracy) in which people could worship Jesus without getting hurt, a world in which we had at last created a government that was roughly the same as the Kingdom of God, where democratic values are closely aligned with Christian values. Now we're having the odd experience of

feeling like missionaries in the very culture we thought we owned.

Back in the heyday of the United Church of Canada, back when we were the largest Christian denomination in Canada, there was a time when Parliament gave a rip about what a Christian denomination thought about some political issue. The Prime Minister would even be invited to attend a meeting of the General Council. Perhaps there was a time when the government was actually interested in a church's insight into some problem rather than simply using the church as a backdrop for making the Prime Minister look good but not any more.

The politics of Jesus are considerably more interesting and consequential than most of what passes for politics these days. You won't read about the politics of Jesus when you download from the "political" section of wherever you get your news because the world does not yet consider the gospel, Good News, as "news."

Jesus Christ and his church are about matters much more complex and important than the concerns of modern, democratic, self-interest politics. I don't think the most important political thing the church can do is to help get some legislation through Parliament on some issue that we care about or to have our denominational leaders invited to the Senate.

It's well documented that many people today are electing to be Christian without being connected to the Christian church. If they succeed, it will be the first time in this faith's two-thousand-year history that anybody has succeeded in being a believer without having an institution to help you believe.

When Jesus began his ministry, he assembled a group of disciples. When his Spirit descended (you might remember we discussed this a few months ago on Pentecost), his Spirit descended not on isolated, freestyling-the-faith individuals but on a body of believers.

Bless you for knowing this "political" truth about Christ. Whatever Jesus chooses to do among

us, he does it not as isolated individuals but as a group. And there you are, being quite “political,” sometimes even revolutionary and subversive, sometimes without even knowing it. You do the hard, patient “political work” of assembling as a congregation, going to meetings, making decisions, giving money, caring for those whom most of the world, including their own governments, have forgotten, putting forth your own resources of time and money to reach out to the most vulnerable.

If we are going to worship a Saviour who comes among us as one of us and takes up our cause as his own, then we can't avoid the mundane, corporeal work of having meetings, forming a congregation that becomes in its life together and its way in the world a visible, breathing, undeniable bodily presence of Christ.

That's why, maybe our most radical, politically significant act is what we're doing right now. I'm standing up and preaching, looking to a crucified Savior who now rules in glory, saying that he is the solution to all that ails us. And then we dare to pray a most politically charged prayer that God's will be done, that God's reign will come on earth as in heaven, whether we like it or not.

The primary way that the church seeks to influence the world is by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift of knowing who God is and what God is up to in the world as the Christ, the Messiah, the Child of God, Ruler of All.

There was a time when some in the church argued that there was a difference between the church as we have it, the visible church, and the true, real, invisible church but don't you believe it.

The church is called to be an actual, real world, visible church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing, community-creating power of God. With the outbreak of war, yet again, in the Middle East, how our terribly broken world right now needs to hear that message. The visible church, that is the only church we have, has no interest in withdrawing

from the world, but it is not surprised when its witness evokes hostility from a world where earthly powers do not take well any challenges to their authority. And, by its very existence, the church is a challenge to worldly authority.

The moment we called Jesus Messiah, or Ruler, rather than simply friend, or teacher, Christians are making a political claim. And the way we live out our peculiar political allegiance is the church.

The church's primarily role is not to agitate on the political left or right, not to take stands with or against certain secular (that is, godless) political parties. The church's job is to witness. Witness is the most politically "effective" thing we can do for the world, that is, the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith that embodies the truth we profess.

When you become a member of the church, we ask you a question that goes something like, "Will you follow the way of Jesus Christ?"

Don't know if you remember, but you answered "I will" to that question.

It's easy to overlook that when you joined the church, when you were baptized/confirmed, you joined a new political entity: the church.

The church is an alternative polis (Greek city state), a countercultural social, political structure, a visible alternative to the world's ways of distributing power, working justice, and finding the life worth living.

I think the best the church can do is hinted at in this Sunday's exchange between Jesus and his critics. We can worship the true and living God in a world that mostly doesn't know that God, in a world where many who call themselves "Christian" can't tell the difference between being a "Canadian" and a "Christian."

In the contemporary world, the modern nation has become the functional equivalent of God, the sole source of our sense of security, that which gives our lives meaning and purpose, that entity for

which we are willing to sacrifice our children.

Therefore, sometimes the best the church can do is to deprive modern, secular politics of its all-consuming, God-like presumptions. We might help the modern state think beyond questions of political power-plays and subsidies and privileges and dare to ask, "What is the life worth living?"

Christians can tell the difference between their nation and the Kingdom of God.

The most interesting, creative, political solutions we Christians have to offer our troubled society are not new laws, advice to Parliament, or increased funding for social programs-although we may find ourselves supporting such national efforts. The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. Here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action. We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers.

The Christian faith recognizes that we are violent, fearful, frightened creatures who cannot reason or will our way out of our mortality. So the gospel begins, not with the assertion that we are violent, fearful frightened creatures, but with the pledge that, if we offer ourselves to a truthful story and the community formed by listening to and enacting that story in the church, we will be transformed into a people more significant than we could ever have been on our own. And the church, with its ministries of truth-telling and truth-embodying, will help you do that.

As Christians we carry two passports, one for the country in which we find ourselves, another for that baptismal nation being made by God from all nations, a realm not made by us and our savvy political strategies but by the active grace of a loving God, who calls us in love to reach out to the entire world. Thanks be to God. Amen.