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Proper 24, Year A, Matthew 22:15-22
22 October 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Introduction—Where are we?

As is so often in the case, we jump around in the generally-biographical story the Gospels tell about Jesus in order to fit them into our Sunday liturgies. We've been looking at some of Jesus' parables the last few weeks, but today we jump ahead in the story to examine one of his most famous aphorisms

- An *aphorism* is the technical term used for one of Jesus' short, pithy sayings—and not only Jesus used them, but many other teachers as well. Aphorisms can a bit like a former parishioner of mine in Pennsylvania called “zingers”
 - You know what a zinger is...it's a sharp, pointed, and sometimes nasty retort to someone else's nasty statement to or about you—if it works, it's designed to silence the other person and “put them in their place”—sometimes humorously and sometimes not...
 - Today's aphorism from Jesus isn't really this kind of a “zinger” but it's very like one, though I will suggest he really wasn't trying simply to win an argument with his adversaries—he was doing that, but he was also trying to make a very important and somewhat subtle point for them...and for us, as well
- As we pick up the story in Matthew today, Jesus has just come from his very dramatic and highly significant action in the Temple—we discussed this episode in Lent as a symbolic destruction of the Temple
 - And, as we saw in Lent, that action in the Temple was the beginning of the end for Jesus; with it, he was assuming an authority that the religious and political leaders, both Jewish and Roman, didn't want to recognize and thus they began to seek ways to discredit him or, failing that, to silence him once and for all
 - Our lesson today is one example of several where he is questioned publicly in such an effort—their aim is to embarrass him in front of his followers and to expose his supposed failings to his potential followers

- So, we are told, the Pharisees send their disciples and some of the “Herodians”—thought to be a party of Hellenistic Jews who supported Herod’s reign under Rome—to ask Jesus a question that, no matter how he answered it, would trap in into saying something that would discredit him:
 - “Is it lawful [that is, lawful from a Jewish perspective] to pay taxes to the emperor [it is assumed, of course, that it’s lawful and necessary from a Roman perspective]?”
- Matthew tells us that Jesus is aware of what they’re trying to do—he didn’t need supernatural insights for this! Nevertheless, Jesus didn’t just walk away...instead, he takes them on: He begins by asking them to show him the coin used for the tax and they produce a denarius.
- Holding the coin out to them, he asks, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” Of course, it was emperor’s likeness and it is his title—son of god—on the coin
- After they concede this, and thinking they’ve now trapped him, he responds with one of his most famous and, perhaps for us, one of his most misunderstood sayings: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” or, in the more well-known King James Version, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.”
- This provocative but, again, for us, probably ambiguous statement, coming as it does just after Jesus actions in the Temple where he overthrew the tables and drove out the money-changers, confirmed for his adversaries that Jesus was assuming an authority to himself that could only be accorded to the Messiah, and thus they could see a confrontation coming soon between Jesus and both the Jewish religious and political leaders and the Roman occupiers—to them, Jesus was beginning to look like one more revolutionary whom, they feared, was about to get a lot of people stirred up and probably killed
- So, this was no idle or merely speculative question of Jewish law that was posed to Jesus; in their exchange, as one commentator says, “Temple, taxes, revolution and Messiahship all went together” (Wright, *Jesus*, p. 502).
 - And so, a lot depended on how Jesus answered their question, and after he did, on what he meant by his answer...

The meaning of the aphorism

We, of course, know *how* he responded—with deliberate and provocative ambiguity. But before we discuss what he *meant*, let me very quickly suggest what he did *not* mean:

- His aphorism is emphatically *not* a statement about what we call the separation of church and state—that is how it is often interpreted these days. But Jesus was not saying that there are two separate and somewhat autonomous spheres or realms that normally should not overlap except in very prescribed and controlled ways—that was a view that Martin Luther would later developed and, even later, a version of it was inserted into our country’s Constitution
- If we read it this way, we are reading our views of the world *back* onto Jesus anachronistically—for him, and even for his Jewish adversaries, the entire earth is the Lord’s—there was and is no sphere or realm on earth from which God rule is excluded

With that being said, what might Jesus mean with this provocative and ambiguous saying?

- First, the fact that Jesus’ adversaries had ready access to such a coin compromised their own high-handed views of themselves as the more faithful Jews
 - Most observant Jews in that day would not carry a coin with images of *any* kind on them—they didn’t even like to *look* at them—and a coin with an image of Caesar on it that proclaimed him the son of god would have been doubly problematic—“there is no God but God”
 - So, even before he gave his ambiguous response, Jesus had already gained the theological and ethical “high ground” on them
- Second, in spite of my earlier discussion of zingers, let me say that Jesus was not merely being dismissive, or trite, or tricky in his response to their question—as we’ll see, for all his ambiguity he was very serious in his response
 - Admittedly, however, he was being cryptic—and that, in part, is what makes it difficult for us to understand the saying from our vantage point—but, recall that in his day and in that society, things said plainly could get one killed

- Third, let's turn to the saying itself, but let's break it down into its two parts
 - "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's..."

It is indeed possible to read the first part of Jesus' statement in revolutionary terms—very much like, it has been suggested, a famous statement by one of Maccabees 170 years before Jesus whose dying words were preserved and well-known: "Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law."

 - The Maccabees had successfully rebelled against the Greek occupiers of the time, and founded a Jewish dynasty that ruled until Rome conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC
 - But Jesus was being more subtle than that earlier Maccabean—he realizes his adversaries are just waiting—and perhaps hoping or fearing—to hear that he is advocating rebellion against Rome but, holding that coin, "Jesus says, in effect, [and here I'm quoting NT Wright again] 'Well then, you'd better pay Caesar back as he deserves!' Had he told them to revolt? Had he told them to pay the tax? He had done neither. He had done both. Nobody could deny that what he was saying was revolutionary, but nor could anyone say that Jesus had forbidden payment of the tax...He was not advocating compromise with Rome; but nor was he advocating straightforward resistance of the sort that refuses to pay the tax today and sharpens its swords for battle tomorrow" (Wright, Jesus, 505).
 - The second clause is also ambiguously two-edged: "Give to God the things that are God's" could mean simply "worship the true god as he deserves." But, when Jesus says this holding a coin, given to him by another Jew, that proclaims Caesar as the son of god, this second saying becomes not simply "a coded protest against paganism...It protests against *Jewish compromise with paganism*. Since Jesus regarded the drive towards revolution as just such a compromise, the saying functions as a further cryptic, riddling challenge to follow him in the real revolution, the real kingdom-movement...[one] which would come about through reflecting the generous love of YHWH into the whole world" (Wright, Jesus, 506-7).
 - The bottom line? It should not come as a surprise to us at this point...

- In the end, Jesus goes further than that earlier Maccabean went. It was not just that Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to *observe* the law; he wanted them to *transcend* the law, as he had discussed in his Sermon on the Mount...he wanted them to join his “royal movement” that would bring the kingdom of God to reality on earth, but in a very different way—not through violent resistance, but again, through reflecting the love of God into the entire world

Conclusion

“Temple, taxes, revolution, and Messiahship” ...Religion, taxes, revolution, and political power—this could be a CNN headline in our own time, and we could fill in the names of the contemporary players for ourselves...

- In the Hebrew scriptures, there are two views of the kingdom of God. We’ve discuss these before, and I’m simplifying here, but I want to remind us of them...
 - Both views have God returning to Jerusalem and establishing a kingdom or reign that extended over the entire earth and all its peoples and nations
 - But the first views the establishment of this kingdom being accomplished by the Messiah as a conquering warrior, after which Israel is set on top of the heap to rule everyone else in God’s name and to enjoy the benefits of their vindication
 - The second sees the return of God to Jerusalem as well, but also the non-violent establishment of a kingdom of peace and justice that is so attractive to the peoples and the nations of the world that they freely give themselves to God and flock to Jerusalem to offer their praise, worship, and fidelity
- Jesus’ teaching was, of course, based on the second view. He saw his followers not as conquerors but as servants and the only power he wanted for himself and for them was the power of love, example, and persuasion.
- So, when, in the end, nothing truly and ultimately belongs to Caesar—*nothing*—and everything truly and ultimately belongs to God, we are presented with the same choice that was presented to and by Jesus: what kind of kingdom do we seek and what will we do, both individually and as a community, to bring it about? Amen.