

The Cross-Shaped Kingdom

Matthew 22.15-22

You may have noticed some signs in the past several weeks that indicate we are in election season. Or you may be thinking, 'oh yeah, there are elections about to happen.' It seems that interest and enthusiasm in these mid-term elections have plummeted compared with the elections in 2010. Perhaps our national attention is more directed to the global threat of ISIS and Ebola, especially since there are multiple cases of Ebola diagnosed here in the U.S.

Or perhaps the waning enthusiasm of voters is also paired with the dissatisfaction with the manner of discourse taking place among opposing candidates. Instead of substantive discussions, it seems that candidates bait one another into making a gaffe. Once a gaffe is made, campaigns and media outlets seize the opportunity to repeat the mistake in an endless loop. It pervades all parties at all levels of government from national, state, to local elections. In a tense political environment, an entire political career can be weighed on a singular public comment. We assess character on sound bytes. /

No matter your voting persuasion, I imagine we all lament the deterioration of honest, respectful discourse. It *seems* the slide into campaign mudslinging is a recent pattern, but it's much more indicative of human nature. Trapping someone in their words is not new at all. It's an ancient strategy, a pharisaical tactic, we might say. The Pharisees set a trap for Jesus, a seemingly no-win situation for the Lord in a politically charged moment. And that deceptive tactic is less a political commitment than it is an expression of the heart. /

In this infamous encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, I pray we will learn from the Lord what it means to stay devoted to the Kingdom of God amidst the kingdoms of the world. There's a great amount of detail in between the lines of this little passage—political rivalries, corruption, and revolutionary strategies infusing each remark and question addressed to Jesus. Jesus is seemingly surrounded with no way out. The encounter begins with an agenda—to **entangle** Jesus in his words to convict him of either treason or blasphemy. The scene closes with everyone **marveling** at Jesus' response to a seemingly impossible question.

His answer wasn't a matter of superb skill in public relations. He doesn't cheat death one more time. This is the Son of God speaking wisdom beyond one moment, beyond one nation, beyond one crisis. This is the Son of God calling us to worship God above all things and see the world in light of God's reign. //

The context and timing of this encounter mean everything in this conversation. Palm Sunday just occurred. Jesus overturned tables in the Temple, driving moneychangers out of the Temple courts. Jesus' actions in the Temple triggered thoughts of revolution for some.

Two hundred years before Jesus, Jewish revolutionaries, namely Judas Maccabeus and Mattathias before him, led revolts to defeat Israel's pagan oppressors and restore the Temple to a place of holy worship.¹ Judas Maccabeus' revolution was successful, cleansing and restoring the Temple. Maccabeus established free Jewish rule in Jerusalem for one hundred years until Rome conquered Israel in 63 A.D.. Then, the Roman Emperor, Pompey, conquered Jerusalem and established pagan rule in unforgettable fashion, desecrating the Holy of Holies in his invasion. This was holy warfare—Pompey believed he was a god.²

From that invasion to the time of Jesus, there had been no successful revolution to overthrow pagan Rome. Israel's kings, namely Herod's family, compromised their call to righteousness by appeasing their Roman rulers. Israel was looking for her new Judas Maccabeus who would restore the Temple and become a righteous King. /

So when Jesus begins overturning tables, the Pharisees see an opportunity. Jerusalem wonders if Jesus will remove the pagans by force in the fashion of Judas Maccabeus. The Pharisees gather some of Herod's minions and try to pin him down for an official statement about a hotly contested matter: taxes. / There's nothing new under the sun. Political opponents are looking for verbal miscues and the subject is always about taxes. /

The way the Pharisees and Herodians craft their question almost guarantees a gaffe that will seal Jesus' fate. 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' / The bait has been cast. If Jesus encourages payment of taxes, he becomes complicit with Rome, angering the zealots and revolutionaries in Israel. If he sides with the revolutionaries,

¹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 504.

² N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 159-160.

rejecting the tax, Herod's compromised court now has material to convict Jesus of treason against Rome. Binary questions are often the discourse of a hidden agenda. /

Jesus recognizes the bait and knows the hook will be set if he chooses either option given to him. He opts for neither choice. / He is not buying time. He is not seeking to be a good moderate in the current politic. He is not afraid of the consequences of his answer. Jesus knows his death has been determined by the will of the Father *before* he answers. This moment becomes the occasion to reveal once more the Father's Kingdom beyond the present government, beyond the present revolution, beyond the present crisis. Jesus will not be entangled in the trappings of the kingdoms of this world. He is not seeking to curry favor with the present ruler because the door to temporal power is a revolving door. Jesus' mission is establishing the Kingdom of God on earth where he shall reign forever and ever over all nations. He won't accomplish that mission in a sound byte. /

Unafraid of death, unintimidated to speak into a pressurized moment, Jesus reverses the momentum of the discussion. 'Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.' As N.T. Wright suggests, our best interpreter of this passage and one in whom I'm especially indebted today, the most scandalous moment of this encounter is what happens next. The Pharisees give Jesus a denarius. Why is that scandalous? Because of the inscription on the coin—Caesar's likeness. Now recall the first two commandments among the ten: 'You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.' So why are Pharisees, known for their excessively strict observance of purity laws, carrying around a graven image of a blaspheming pagan ruler on their person? //

From a seemingly impossible question to Jesus, the Pharisees and Herodians are now knocked back on their heels, exposed in their hearts of unfaithfulness to God. Now on the defensive, Jesus doesn't pin them to the wall in their shame, so much as he calls them to devoted worship of God alone. 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' /

A seemingly enigmatic statement now sheds a bit more light. Consider that 'thing' that was on a display, a symbol of the political debate about taxes. The denarius 'thing' is gold. The likeness on the coin is one who blasphemes the holiness of the true

God of heaven and earth. It's a worthless item. It's the currency of a kingdom that is passing away. Your real treasure belongs to a Kingdom that will never pass away.³ So go ahead, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's./

But render to God what is God's. He has given us all sanctity of life by making us in his image and likeness. Worship the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. These are the real treasures. This is our spiritual act of worship. Render to God what is God's. / And with that response, everyone marveled at the wisdom of God in Jesus. //

It would only be a matter of days between this exchange that both Rome and Israel would marvel again at the wisdom and power of God. They would marvel at the wisdom of God hanging on a cross. 'Truly this man was the Son of God' the Roman soldier confessed at the cross. It was at the cross that God's unshakeable Kingdom was established through his Son. At the cross, Jesus dethroned pagan empires and disarmed the powers and principalities of this present darkness. At the cross, Jesus reveals the victory of God.

Christ himself lived his words 'render to God's the things that are God's.' Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father and Christ devoted his life back to the Father for our sake. Remember Peter's words: we were 'not ransomed with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.' It's just inane to compare that marvelous gift with tax reform. //

On the other hand, I don't want to suggest that matters of public policy do not matter in light of God's eternal Kingdom. What happens here on earth very much matters to the Kingdom of Heaven. Each day we pray 'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

What I'm suggesting is that modern politics is not informed by a theology of the cross. This is not a radical statement. Every political party will fall short of the glory of God. But our hope is never found in a political party or a campaign platform. Nor will elections, legislation, and court rulings establish the Kingdom of God on earth. That is not where our hope will be found. I pray for godly and humble public servants. I pray for legislation that would be grounded on God's wisdom. I pray for court rulings that

³ Matthew 6.19.

would resemble God's justice. It's very important to engage on public issues; it's very easy to become so entangled in political concerns that we forget the Cross of Christ.

Activism is all around. Liberal activism, conservative activism, moderate activism. The great 20th century philosopher, Charles Taylor, suggests that we have never left the 1960s. To quote Rusty Reno: 'It's always 1968 somewhere.'⁴ Revolutions aren't the trend, they have become the norm. But so often, today's revolutionaries quickly become tomorrow's oppressors.⁵ So maybe the real revolution is to pledge allegiance only to a Kingdom revolution that isn't new at all. It's two thousand years old and it won't be complete until Christ returns at the end of time.

I believe that public witness is different than activism. We are called to engage with matters of social and public importance in our world. Thank God for the witness of saints such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Wilberforce, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King, Jr. But our engagement with social and public issues stems from a life of worship, not from humanistic notions of progress. Activism defines social progress as success; Christian witness defines success as the redemption of God's good world. That redemption project will require more patience, more suffering, more resilient hope. /

The great 20th century theologian, Lesslie Newbigin, gives such wise counsel for these matters in our day. Newbigin said that where there is a worshipping community of the risen Lord 'there will be challenge by word and behavior to the ruling powers.' Of that social engagement he said the New Testament teaches three things: 1. we should not expect success in our cause; 2. we should expect a sharpening of the issues; 3. that there is no hope apart from Christ. Do not let your hearts be troubled though, for we have seen God's faithfulness in history through his saints. But that faithfulness in political change also meant the cross. Newbigin said of the fall of the Roman empire, 'it was not the superiority of the Church's preaching which finally disarmed the Roman imperial power, but the faithfulness of its martyrs.'⁶ Suffering reverses power in this world, preparing our world for the reign of the Lamb of God.

So we are empowered both in worship and for engagement each week at the place of sacrifice: the Eucharist. Here is the victory of God, won through suffering. Here

⁴ Quoted in James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 38.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 151.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 136-137.

is where we render to God what is God's. Here is where we find courage and hope for the redemption of God's good world. Here is where we render our worship to the only God who deserves our total devotion—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.