

Bearing God's Image

Reading: Matthew 22.15-22

I wonder if any of us when we were at school were taken, with our class, on a field trip. The idea of the trip was that we catch a field mouse or perhaps a bird and take it back to school to study it and later to return it safely to its natural environment.

Preparation for the trip would be that we would need a wooden fruit case, or a strong cardboard box, a stick, some string and a handful of wheat to put in the box to tempt our quarry.

On the day of the hunt, together with our teacher, we would gather at the hunting ground and one of our class was given the task to activate the trap and catch our little animal. The class all hid behind the bushes staying quiet until the quarry was caught.

There are many situations around the world where it is important to trap animals. In Africa, park rangers will use massive iron cages to catch large animals such as Rhino, Lions, Hippo's etc. In some cases this is to treat injuries and other times it might be to transfer them into the safe environment of a Safari Park.

There are situations where these animals are in danger from poachers who trap them and kill them for the profit they can make from horns, skins, bones and many other parts.

So when we look at it there are traps that are good, and provide safety and care. Then there are traps, that are evil and seek only to bring harm and pain.

A Trap for Jesus

Today's reading from Matthew chapter 22 begins "Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words" (22:15).

What was their purpose? What were they hoping to achieve? They wanted Jesus out of the way. To this end they were trying to get Jesus to say or do something that would get him where they wanted him, that would put him under their control.

What was their motive? If we reflect on the recent events, Jesus had entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday - riding on a donkey in deliberate fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. It wasn't the expected Messianic announcement, but the common people understood well enough and welcomed Jesus as "the Son of David" (21.9). That this should have happened without the investigation and approval of the Jewish leaders was bad enough.

But Jesus went further. He went straight into the Temple "and drove out all who were buying and selling there", saying that the Father's house of prayer had been made "a den of thieves" (21:12-13). All this trade was going on with the leaders' approval - and they no doubt received their commission!

They discussed the matter overnight and confronted Jesus the next day - "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" (21.23) Jesus threw a question back to them, "John's baptism - where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" Jesus caught them at their own game and they wouldn't answer.

Then Jesus told them three parables. First, the two sons who were asked to work in the vineyard. The one who said he wouldn't go changed his mind and went. That's like the tax collectors and prostitutes who repented under John's preaching - but the leaders Jesus was talking to, didn't!

Secondly, the tenants in the vineyard who refused to give the owner his share of the harvest and finally killed the owner's son in a bid to seize the vineyard for themselves. The chief priests and Pharisees knew the parables were about them - they wanted to arrest Jesus, but couldn't for fear of the crowds.

Thirdly, Jesus told about the wedding feast. The invitation was ignored or rejected by those first invited, so that others from the streets were gathered into the feast. This was against the Jewish leaders too.

Should We Pay Tax to Rome?

There were some curious alliances in this attempt to "get" Jesus. First we see Pharisees and members of Herod's party (Herodians) come to trap him.

They begin with flattering Jesus - you always tell the truth, even if it might be unpopular. Then the trap question, "What is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (22.17)

A curious alliance, because these supporters of Herod would have supported the tax, whereas the Pharisees hated it.

There was a genuine question here - behind a very evil motive! The genuine question arose because the Emperor claimed divinity and demanded worship. The Jewish Law specifically forbade worshiping other gods. The Jewish religion was considered a legally recognised religion. They were exempted from the necessity of worshiping the Emperor, but were, of course, still expected to pay tax.

The motive behind the question was to trap Jesus whichever way he answered. If he agrees with the tax he will begin to lose popularity. If he disagrees with it, it will be a matter for the Roman authorities.

The answer of Jesus was brilliant in its simplicity. Their coins bore the face and name of the Emperor - "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (v. 21).

When Poll Tax was first introduced in this country, there was real uprising against it, and many Christian communities responded with this text "Give to Ceasar what is Ceasar's, and to God, what is God's".

Stewardship

That answer is still very relevant for us. We do have responsibilities to the secular state. Paul wrote to the Romans, that we must obey the state authorities because they are there by the purpose of God to provide good order in society.

You must obey them, he says, as a matter of conscience: "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour" (Rom. 13.1-7).

Do you use the roads and the footpaths? Then pay your taxes. Do you live in a fairly safe society? Then pay your taxes... There are all kinds of good reasons why, as part of society, sharing the benefits of what the government does, we should play our part in the cost of the community.

Let's remember that, when Paul wrote that, a particularly nasty man called Nero was the Roman emperor, and that the Christians in Rome had no say, no vote in who was governing them. In time Nero would have Paul put to death.

But, above everyone else, we are responsible to God. This is God's world. We are God's people, bought with the precious blood of Jesus the Son of God himself. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, "You are not your

own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body (all that you are and have)" (1 Cor. 6:19b-20).

"Give to God what is God's," Jesus said.

In reflecting on our stewardship over the past month, we have been challenged to consider again what it means for us to "give God what is God's."

But wait a minute, we are in the middle of a Covid-19 epidemic, it is becoming more severe, and it is affecting many of us. Many are being made redundant, losing their jobs or having to cope with a reduction in working hours, resulting in a reduction in income.

Let me ask a question. Does our God make demands on us? The answer is yes he does! When God created mankind, to live on the earth which He had created, he demanded that His people should "Worship" "Honour" and "Praise" Him.

This is the prime directive, this why God created mankind. If we read the Old Testament books covering the travels of God's people, the Israelites, we read time and time again how they turned their backs on God.

When Moses was up the mountain getting the Laws which the people were to follow, the Israelites were bored and built a golden calf to worship. They broke God's first commandment "Thou shalt have no other God's but me." God was so angry, he destroyed and killed the leaders and punished the people involved severely.

Is this the image we carry of our God in our hearts? If we respond to God by obeying his command, to "worship", "honour" and "praise", then I know in my heart that God will guide, protect, care, love us supporting us in this difficult time of isolation.

Paul in our second reading from 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 is highly delighted with the warm response he received from the Christian families and friends.

We also are part of a Christian family here at All Saints, what are families for to care and to share. And that is even more so with our Christian families. If you and your family and friends are struggling at this time, of lock down and restriction find someone you can trust to talk to and pray with, remember that God will not burden us beyond what we can cope with.

Jesus, of course, was going beyond the question of tithing. To "give back to God what belongs to him" is to bring all that we have and are. There are times when our loyalty to God must over-ride our loyalty to Caesar. Jesus calls us into the Kingdom of God – to live under the Rule of God. That is not a life that can ever be all centred on ourselves. It is a life to be lived out with responsibility and integrity within this world day by day.

"May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus prepare the way for us. May the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow more and more. In this way he will strengthen you, and you will be perfect and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all who belong to him" (vs. 11-13).

We belong to God. Our faith is in God the Father and in Jesus Christ the Son. The Holy Spirit is with us and living in us. We experience his power and his joy. We have work to do - the Lord has given us work to do - but we look forward to the time when he is coming again. What a glorious time that is going to be! Amen!