

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 16 OCTOBER 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Matthew 22:15-22; Isaiah 45:1-8; Psalm 24

“The Son of God and the Emperor”

To be able to understand the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians, it is important to look at the political and religious realities of Jesus' day as well as of the time in which the gospel was written.

Israel is occupied territory. Jerusalem is a powder keg ready to blow at any minute. By the time the gospel is written the rebellion of 70CE has already taken place. Jerusalem and the temple have been razed to the ground by the Romans. The young Christian community is confronted with prosecution by the Romans and lives in conflict with the Jewish community she has originated from. A broad variety of political and religious groups surround them. Some of these groups are prepared to accept the inevitable - compromise and work with the Romans - others are in radical opposition. Some are sympathetic to Jesus and his followers, others are very hostile towards them.

When this conversation takes place, it is nearly Pesach and Jerusalem is full of pilgrims. Stories of liberation and freedom that are traditionally told as part of the celebrations could be fanning rebellious sentiments that are already in existence even further. Wherever people look, they are confronted with the hard to take political reality of occupation.

Soldiers in full Roman armour stand at the ready on every street corner to keep the crowds under control with brute force if need be. From every public building banners are flying in the Roman Imperial colours and panels with imagery of Roman gods. Heroes and leaders decorate walls in every street and surround every square. Everywhere the glory of the Roman Empire is proclaimed through imagery and text. The international coin pilgrims use to pay for their board and lodging has the image of the emperor on it. The text on these coins pronounce the emperor to be god and high priest. At the time of Jesus they would have said: “Emperor Tiberius, divine son of the exalted, divine god Augustus, high priest”.

Some Jewish groups refuse to use these coins, or even to carry them with them. In temple precincts money changers do good business changing these blasphemous coins, which so flagrantly desecrate the first commandment, into more appropriate Jewish or Tyrian coinage, helping to protect the sanctity of the sanctuary.

A few days earlier Jesus attacked the money changers and turned over their tables. We can safely assume they've been re-installed by now. For them the days before Pesach are top days. Every day, at close of business their pockets are filled with valuable Roman coin. The sacrificial animal traders, who also suffered Jesus' ire that day, are once again making huge profits by overcharging the poor who come to buy a couple of doves for their sacrifice.

Jesus tears down the stalls and pulls over the tables and then starts healing the lame and the blind. Like the coins, the lame and the blind were banned from entering the sanctuary. By healing them Jesus opens the doors of the Temple for them. With the money changers and animal traders temporarily out of action even the poor can enter without having to spend prohibitive amounts of money on sacrifice. The Kingdom has arrived!

That those who have everything to gain from the status quo don't like this one bit should be clear. Not only the money changers and the traders are losing money hand over fist, but the temple authorities don't get their share of the profit either. And what if the ideas this rabbi is preaching take root? The whole economic structure that supports the temple would come crashing down. And not only that, all sorts of inappropriate people could start desecrating this holy place with their unholy and unpleasant presence.

They'll have to get rid of this troublesome man before things get out of hand. But how? They try public debate, about authority, about the law, about the resurrection of the dead, and here, about taxes. They probably think they will easily be able to take him on, this simple carpenter Rabbi from Nazareth with his fisherman friends. See if they can discredit him either with the government or the people.

As a rule, Pharisees and Herodians didn't get on too well, but in their desire to get rid of Jesus they find each other. First they butter him up. And, ironically, hypocrites that they are, they hit the nail right on the head when they do. "Teacher, we know you are sincere and teach the of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one..."

With sincere faces, but ready to pounce at any indiscretion, they put an important matter of conscience to him. It is a trick they may have learned from Jesus himself a couple of verses back when they asked him about the legitimacy of his authority. At that time he left them at a loss for words, scared that an honest answer would set the crowd against them. Speaking of showing deference...

"Teacher, should we pay taxes? Can we, as people of faith, support this government?"

Every adult had to pay a personal tax of one denarius. Later on a percentage tax on property was added to that, but how much and when that happened, and if it had happened by the time the gospel is written, is not clear. It may be that the gospel writer, around 100 is projecting this "Jew Tax" back in time, or it may be that it was already in place by the time Jesus has this debate with the Herodians and Pharisees. We know that by the time the gospel was written the question of the tax should be paid was a real one, discussed widely among Jews all across the Roman Empire. The amount was equal to the amount Jews paid as "temple tax" before the temple was destroyed and it had to be paid in Roman coin.

"Have you got a denarius on you?" asks Jesus, and "Whose image is on it?" "The emperor's" they respond. "Well, if his image is on it, this probably indicates it is his, doesn't it? Best to return it. You guys, who take so much care to make sure this blasphemous little coin does not enter the temple, should know that better than anyone.

This response would have been enough to send them home with the tail between their legs. Pay the tax, Herodians. Your boss, Herodus, won't be able to charge me with incitement. Keep well away from these blasphemous coins, you Pharisees, you won't hear me tell anyone to hang on to those coins that say that the emperor is god and high priest.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there, he goes a step further. "Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God" he says.

What does Jesus refer to with those words? What is it that belongs to God? To name just three passages where this is raised out of many others. In Isaiah 45 it says even the great Persian King

Cyrus belonged to God and did nothing but God's will. Those familiar with Psalm 24 know that it proclaims that the earth and everything in it belong to God. In the first chapter of Genesis humanity is said to be created in God's image, as the image bearer of God.

What Jesus refers to here undermines the authority of the emperor on a much deeper level than the adhering to tax laws could ever do. Compared to the God Jesus refers to, the divine emperor Tiberius, son of the god Augustus is nothing more than a tool in the hands of a higher power. The images that so proudly adorn his coins as easily melted into something else as his power will wane with the years while the image of Jesus' God will forever be reflected in the face of mankind.

The Son of God versus a son of a god. A son who levelled Jerusalem and its temple, and who violently persecutes his people. His image is on coins that tell the world he is a saviour, a king of peace, the high priest. Diametrically opposite we find the Son who heals the lame and the blind and opens the temple doors to anyone who longs to enter. The Son who is the image of God, the image of a new humanity, a new Adam.

So where do we stand in this debate? What kind of compromises are we prepared to enter into when our balance sheets come under threat? How does our sense of self preservation and greed influence our positions in business and life? Whose image do people see when they look at us? How much deference do we pay to what others may feel or think about us? Who and what do we trust? Does God come into it at all? How do we view the world? As a place with God on the periphery or as a place with God at its centre? Whom do we belong to? God? Or someone, or something else? And whom does what we have belong to?

It is good to reflect on these questions every now and again. Especially when the issue of tax, of the sharing of wealth, of hospitality and generosity are once again on the political agenda. What guides us in these issues? Fear, a desire to make what we regard as "ours" secure? Or the awareness that we are called to look after the beauty and bounty we've been given and share it so the Kingdom will grow in our midst and more will be able to enter into it? Amen.