

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 22:15-22
Gotta Serve Somebody

Bob Dylan composed a song entitled, 'Gotta Serve Somebody.' It went like this:

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,
You're gonna have to serve somebody.
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

As well as winning him the Grammy Award for best male rock vocal back in 1979, the song marked Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity. It also poses the challenge that I think underlies today's Gospel passage.

In the wake of an election campaign, we may (or not) think taxation is an important issue, but whatever your view on the matter, I can tell you, it's nothing compared to how it ranked in first century Palestine. Imagine how you'd feel if you woke up tomorrow to find that we'd been invaded, and the occupying forces were demanding that you pay taxes for the privilege of having them here. Think about it - first century Jews were required to pay their oppressors a tax to support their own oppression! It was called the Imperial tax. Not surprisingly, it was an issue that had caused a revolt, and which the Romans had brutally crushed – leaving the population in no doubt, that there was no room for negotiation over the matter.

At the same time, Jesus was becoming ever-more popular, and it was assumed by many that he would, of course, oppose this oppressive taxation. Two religious groups, who normally were opposed to each other, sided over their opposition to Jesus and, on this occasion, sought to trap him with a trick question – embroiling him in this politically hot potato. They reckoned that if Jesus advocated paying this tax, he would disappoint his followers. If he advocated not paying this tax, he would be in trouble with the Romans. They thought they had him!

Jesus begins his answer by asking them for a coin. When they produce the coin that's used to pay this tax they show themselves up, by revealing their willingness to handle this loathed currency. A coin is the property of the ruler in whose name it's issued. To possess it, is to admit an obligation to the Roman state. So, Jesus has turned the tables on them. But there's more to come. Another reason the coin was hated, was what was on the coin. Jews were forbidden to put images of human faces on their coins; but Caesar, of course, had his image imprinted on it – proclaiming to all that he was in charge – he was the most important being in the world.

His opponents' question backfires on them. Jesus says, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' But what does he mean by this?

In a sense, Jesus' answer evades the question. He acknowledges the existence of Caesar's power, symbolised by the coin. He acknowledges that all governments have a certain power and authority over us. But he doesn't offer a theory of politics. You won't find here an answer for all times and situations about how we respond to civil authority. And he certainly doesn't intend to divide the world into separate areas belonging to the emperor or God, each with a respective and exclusive jurisdiction.

Nor does Jesus answer the question as to what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. If we're looking for a black and white rule we'll not find it here.

'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' As well as turning the tables on his accusers, Jesus calls them, and us, to a higher accountability and faithfulness than they'd imagined possible. And this is where Bob Dylan comes in. 'You gotta serve somebody.' Jesus made it abundantly clear who he served.

Jesus isn't, of course, trying to trap or trick us. What I hear him doing, is inviting us to consider again the place God has in our lives. Jesus asked the question about whose image is on the coin... Here's that's question posed in another way: Whose image do we carry in our life? Whose image is on us! Whose image is on our hearts? How do we express our loyalty to Christ? How do we give expression to our calling as God's beloved children?

There aren't neat answers to those questions. They are ones that we have to work through, struggle with, as we seek to follow Christ. The way this passage is sometime interpreted is to suggest we should be able to just take a piece of paper, divide it into two columns, one for God and one for our emperors, and start making our list. So, there's God stuff and emperor stuff – sacred stuff and secular stuff – spiritual and non-spiritual. But I don't think we can make such a neat divide. We can't compartmentalize our lives in that way because of who we are.

In the New Testament reading Paul is writing to the Thessalonians and says we're imitators of the Lord... we reflect God... we carry the image of God. No matter what we may do or say, no matter where we may go, no matter what may happen to us, we are first and foremost and forever, God's beloved children. And, if we believe this and live this, God will shape all that we say and do and how we live. We belong to God. We are God's beloved children now, and for eternity.

We, like all the baptised, are signed with the cross, inscribed with Christ. When we 'give to God what belongs to God' we give our entire selves. And we give ourselves not only in what we do, in what we choose, but in how we choose – trusting in God's grace, meeting Christ in the uncertain dilemmas of life, and rejoicing in God's love and mercy. Bob Dylan gets it.

You're gonna have to serve somebody.

It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

In working with this passage, I've not offered a neat and tidy answer about how we unpack and live this out. All I can say is that all of life is God's, and since all of life is God's and since 'you gotta serve somebody,' we serve and love and live in the love and rule of Jesus Christ. We belong to God. We are God's children. Our calling is to believe that and live it.

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