

SERMON 22 OCTOBER 2017

We live in a very beautiful world. Here, where we are, the Springtime flowers and their perfume is uplifting. The jacarandas and many other trees are blossoming and it all seems to indicate goodness and abundance. We are blessed with friendships and love that makes life worthwhile, even if, at times, these things get caught up in our human differences. We live in times of relative prosperity and we can probably say that life is good, though we may have to deal with our share of aches and pains.

At the same time, this world of ours also seems caught up in tension in the political sphere, at home and abroad, and in the religious sphere also. There are polarizing arguments on a whole number of different issues, and, were it not for the fact that some of these things seem critical for human survival and the flourishing of the planet, it would be very tempting to opt out and turn away from all the different forms of news media. There are a lot of people who find all this quite overwhelming and can't find many voices of hope around. Unfortunately, the churches are seen to be proclaiming very different opinions, disagreeing even within the same denomination, and so obscuring what many others see as core to a gospel which commands us to love our neighbour and care for the marginalised and the very earth itself. There are those who maintain that religion and politics should be kept separate, thereby reducing faith to a personalised spirituality rather than the challenging commitment to following Jesus' more radical way of living. There is a real tension in this, but I don't know how we can pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done" and not see that that is a prayer that questions how we live our lives. If it doesn't do that we are opting out and imagining that we can just quietly ask God to make everything right for us without us doing anything about being part of that hoped-for healing in the world.

So, having got off to a rather challenging start, let's come back to the gospel. Today's reading from Matthew seems to me to speak very clearly into this situation. There is a lot going on in these verses that may not immediately be apparent. Jesus is in the Temple courts. He has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, been greeted like a king, though one riding on a donkey and this has made him seem a threat to the good order of the society. He has cleared out the money changers from

the Temple precincts and criticised the religious authorities. Now he is met by an extraordinary coming-together of Pharisees and Herodians who would not normally associate. The Herodians were allied to the Roman government. The Pharisees were the religiously devout and normally kept themselves separate from government officialdom. Clearly they have found a mutual imperative to get rid of Jesus and the need to act seems pressing. So they think they have found a perfect way to entrap him. They will ask him about paying taxes and he will have to choose either to side with the government against the Jewish religion or side with the religious against the government. Jesus asks for a coin. That simple request is telling in itself. No-one should have had a coin within the Temple. It was forbidden as being sacrilegious. That is why there were money changers there. Only the Temple currency was proper. But Jesus is handed a Roman coin. On the coin is an image of the emperor's head, a graven image, such as caused great difficulty for the Jews. But, more than that, on the reverse side was engraved the words "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest." Many faithful Jews had long been incensed by this which, in their eyes, was idolatry. There had been revolts by the Zealots that would culminate in disastrous ones from 66-70CE.

"Is it lawful?", Jesus is asked. The coin clearly belongs to Caesar, and Jesus doesn't refute the paying of taxes. But his response about giving to God what is God's clearly indicates which of these is more important. In effect, if God is God there is nothing that does not belong to him.

This raises many issues, just as powerfully today as it did back then. Jesus has been proclaiming the Kingdom of heaven. He has been enacting this, preaching it, teaching it, living it. To live as followers of Christ is to seek to be part of creating that kingdom wherever we are. Yet we live in a world where society and law demands much of us, not least in taxes. It was back in 1789 that Benjamin Franklin wrote to a friend "In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes." In Chapter 17, Matthew has already given an account of a conversation between Jesus and Peter about paying the Temple tax because the disciples have been asked by the tax collectors if Jesus paid the tax. "Yes, he does" says Peter. After the conversation, Jesus sends Peter out to catch a fish and tells him that the first fish he catches will have the required coin in its mouth, which it does.

This morning's reading uncomfortably asks us to think about how we prioritise living in the ways of God's kingdom when we also have to live in the world of government authority. We know that society needs our tax revenue for it to function, to care for the needy, provide education, medical care and so much more. The trouble is that we may not always like the way our money is spent. How can we be true to the values of the Kingdom of God as we go about our everyday lives? As I have already suggested, our faithful response to Christ cannot be kept in a Sunday box and brought out when convenient. How our faith informs our life, our responses, our decisions is a question that hovers over everything we do, and sometimes it can make things feel very complicated.

The fact remains that Jesus calls us live within the ways of the Kingdom and that our effort to do so, across every part of our lives, is of primary importance. I read this comment from Stanley Hauerwas: "Christianity is not a philosophy that can be learned separate from those who embody it." It is when we see the Kingdom values embodied that we find inspiration and hope in the complexities of life. While we cling to the understanding that God accepts, welcomes and loves each one and offers us words of understanding, mercy and grace, we also can't escape the fact that some of issues of life and faith challenge us. It can be at such times that we know we don't just learn from teaching, from listening to the Word. We learn through the stories of faithful people who struggle in different situations but ones that we can relate to. So here are some stories that are examples of how some people have made often costly decisions about how they shape their lives as they try to live within God's Kingdom.

In 1970's in Scotland, there were many protests at the nuclear bases that had been built in some of the deep sea lochs on the beautiful west coast. For many people the presence of nuclear weapons that were stored in bunkers under the hillsides was an affront to their Christian beliefs. So, apart from maintaining peace vigils outside the bases, a movement started where people withheld something like 10% of their taxes, in proportion to what was being spent on this weaponry. People also then paid this amount into other funds to go to overseas aid. People were prosecuted for this and fined. But for these people this was not just a symbolic protest but

something deeply felt. Their faith would not let them be party to this. There have been many other similar protests, like, for instance, boycotting South African goods, particularly oranges, as a personal stance against the apartheid regime.

There is another story, that has come to light recently in a movie about a real situation – Hacksaw Ridge. The young man, Desmond Doss, about whom this film was made, grew up in a Seventh Day Adventist family in small rural town in USA. When the US joined the Second World War, Desmond signed up like all his friends. He wanted to be a medical orderly. He got through all the first part of the training easily, very fit young man as he was. But then came the weapons training and he refused to touch a gun. He ended up being bullied, physically abused by his fellow trainee soldiers and subjected to terrible treatment. He was court martialled and only got through that because his violent and drunkenly abusive father, a veteran of the Vietnam war, appeared at the court room and addressed the senior officer there with whom he served in Vietnam. Desmond goes off to war.

The scene shifts to Okinawa as his company arrives at the foot of a cliff down which wide rope ladders had been fixed. The troops were to climb up and confront the Japanese who had already inflicted heavy casualties on the US troops. The soldiers scale the ladders and engage in heavy combat. There are lots of casualties and they end up being forced to retreat down the cliff. Desmond has been busy all this time, going to the wounded and carrying them out of the line of fire. He is one of the last of the men at the cliff top, making their way back down to safety, but he looks back and hears the groans of the wounded who are still lying across the battle ground. He stays. That night, there are only two soldiers keeping some sort of watch at the foot of the cliff. The rest had retreated a safe distance. Suddenly they see a body being lowered on a rope down the cliff. It is a wounded soldier. They rush over and put him in their truck and take him to the hospital base and return. All through that night more and more wounded soldiers are lowered down, one by one – 75 in all. Desmond is there, his hands raw from the rope as he uses all his strength to counter-balance the weight of the men he is lowering. Each time you think he might then get down the cliff himself but each time he says “Just one more, God. Just one more.” He does, eventually come down, physically and emotionally exhausted. He has astounded everyone, even the most hardened officers.

The next day the troops are commanded to go back up again. It is a Saturday. You see the men waiting at the foot of the cliff. They have refused to go unless Desmond goes with them. He is praying. They miss their appointed time, but they wait. Desmond finishes his prayers and goes back up with them. Now the morale is quite different. There is fierce fighting, but this time the US troops gain the upper hand. Once more Desmond is risking his life. One of those he saves is the commanding officer who had been so opposed him at the beginning.

Desmond never touched a gun. He held fast to what his faith told him. His commanding officer said it was the most conspicuous act of bravery he ever witnessed. Desmond was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour, the only conscientious objector to be so honoured. He was badly wounded himself and lost the use of his left arm. He developed TB which he contracted in the war. He required surgery and lost 5 ribs and a lung. He was discharged on 90% disability. Later, an overdose of antibiotics left him completely deaf, but, in spite of all this, he still went on to work his small farm after the war and raise his family.

How do we live in the Kingdom's way in our lives and as a community of faith? These stories may seem far removed from our stories and more extreme than anything we have faced. But they remind us that we should be aware, always, of the choices we make. Some of these choices will be very small, day to day matters. Some of them will be bigger. Often there may be compromises. But if we prayerfully and honestly consider what is being asked of us, then, with God's grace, we will not be compromising on our faith. And, just as much, we will know that we are joining our lives to the great flow that is the life of the Kingdom, in which is our hope, our fulfilment and that of the whole world of which we are a part - even with all its complexities and challenges. Therein is joy, peace and grace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.