

“In returning and rest, you will be saved”

Our passage from Matthew’s gospel, which I read to you just a few moments ago, certainly illustrates that God casts down the “high and lifted-up”, or those who exalt themselves. This is seen in the conversation that Jesus has with the Pharisees and also with their unlikely allies in this endeavour, the Herodians. They find themselves somewhat dumbfounded at the end of their encounter with Jesus, although they were trying to trip him up, in the question that they put to him.

On the one hand, if he had answered, “It is OK to give taxes to Caesar,” he could be labelled as a person who simply collaborated with the Roman power, and therefore that would mean he would lose popularity, shall we say, with people. That was one strategy of the Herodians, who were essentially somehow connected with the power that existed at that time, under Herod, or Herod Antipas. On the other hand, if Jesus said, “No, you must not pay taxes to Caesar,” then he could have been labelled as a rebel, as an insurrectionist, one who was wanting to overthrow, in some way, Roman power.

Well, he said neither of these things. In the older translation, he said, “Render to Caesar the things (or what belongs to) Caesar, and render to God the things (or what belongs to) God.”

So the theme of the mighty being cast down is in evidence even in this dialogue that Jesus has with these various individuals. But it also could be detected in the answer itself of Jesus, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now, in the gospels, there is not a great deal of comment by Jesus on—shall we say—the power of the state, or the power of the emperor. Jesus does say, in John’s gospel, when he is speaking to Pilate,

“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin (John 19:11).”

Well, these are words from John’s gospel, which indicate, at least, that the power that was associated with Rome, or the powers of today, whether municipal or provincial or federal, or whatever it may be—all that comes from God, but is also answerable to God. And such powers can be overthrown.

This was a dominant theme throughout the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people, the people of Israel, could see that, for example, God could use a foreign ruler, such as Cyrus of Persia, to overthrow the Babylonians and bring freedom to the Jews. But that same power could be overthrown itself if it deviated from the justice and righteousness that God wanted it to exemplify.

And so, up to a point, the Jewish people lived in a sort of patience with respect to worldly power. They obeyed it. In fact, sometimes, they achieved remarkable positions of authority within that worldly power. You could think of Joseph in Egypt. But you could also think of Daniel in Babylon, or Esther in the court of King Ahasuerus. But the Jews frequently had the idea that these powers were a threat to them. But, eventually, if those powers overstepped the bounds, they themselves would be overthrown.

However, even Jews of later times did not always exemplify this. They rebelled, as in the Maccabean period, which is found described in the “apocryphal” part of the Bible, which can be

found in the Book of Maccabees. In the story of the Maccabees, we can see that the Jews could rebel against powers which were very much contrary to the faith that they held in the LORD, the God of Israel.

We, in our modern times, sometimes step in, when it comes to worldly powers. But, fortunately, we have elections, whereby we have the choice of getting rid of a government which we find no longer up to the task or faithful to its mandate. We also, in our modern democracies, have a press which is more or less free. It's not totally free. But we have a press which can point out to the citizenry the ways in which the government is deviating from what one would expect from it—namely, justice and righteousness, rather than corruption, for example.

But the Christian way of dealing with worldly powers is ultimately to see them under the greater authority of God, who can, by whatever means, remove them. And, sometimes, what is required from us is patience, and also being fully aware of what our governments are doing.

That, then, could be seen in Jesus' response to the Pharisees and the Herodians, who came to him.

Just another illustration from another part of the Bible—the apostle Paul, right at the end of chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans, says that we are not to take vengeance ourselves. We are to leave avenging to God to accomplish. That is right at the end of chapter twelve of his letter to the Romans. And then, at the beginning of chapter 13, Paul specifically calls on the Christians in Rome to be obedient to the worldly authorities, because the worldly authorities, as far as he is concerned, are there for a purpose—to keep order, etc. So, therefore, taxes and honour, and so on, are due these authorities. And, therefore, if there is avenging to do, it is sometimes the worldly power who is to do that avenging.

But, on the other hand, you could also—although Paul doesn't state it in so many words—you could also see that the worldly power itself can be avenged, if, as I said, it strays from what it should be doing—namely, keeping order and justice and peace in the land.

Well, another aspect of what one could see in Jesus' response to the Pharisees and the Herodians is not only that God has the power to remove worldly powers, which have gone away from their true mandate, of keeping righteousness and justice in the land. We could see, perhaps, in Jesus' answer to these Pharisees and Herodians, an indication that those who are oppressed, those who are “marginalized” (to use a jargon sort of term) by the powers that be, are to receive special attention from followers of Jesus.

Jesus, himself, as you know, spent time with tax collectors, and other sinners. These people were definitely “on the margin”, as far as those Pharisees were concerned. These were people who were not keeping the law, who were collaborators, essentially, with the Roman power, and, therefore, were to be despised. However, Jesus, in his way of dealing with such people—tax collectors, prostitutes, other sinners—saw in them human beings whom God loves. And so, they found in Jesus not the scorn of the Pharisees; they found, instead, a person who saw in them children of God, people made in the image of God.

Lately, I have been reading a history of preaching, beginning from early times, and extending into the twentieth century—in fact, right to the end of the twentieth century; the book came out in 2004. There is a whole chapter on the African-American preaching mode. And, of course, most of us are familiar with that style of preaching via one famous sermon, “I have a dream”, which is truly an amazing sermon of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Well, that sermon happened in the 1960's. But that whole tradition of African-American preaching was going on long before then. And, through that preaching, the black people of the United States, in particular, were able to see themselves as "somebodies", as people, rather than as "nobodies"; many of them found themselves in that position in the society of their day.

So we who follow the Christian faith have a duty to be attentive to those who are—shall we say—"marginalized" by the powers that be.

Now, these people who are so "marginalized" can be quite a variety of individuals—people, for example, with a gambling problem. Our governments have made it a point to institute organized gambling in our society, through lotteries, etc. But there are victims, of course, of that whole practice in our society. And those people live, really, under the radar. We are not really told of the problems associated with gambling.

Somebody has said that, in our time, there is a certain attentiveness to people, in a variety of conditions, and their human rights, and so on. But the environment is an entity which needs the defence of people, because it does not have a voice, and it is sometimes severely damaged and/or compromised.

Now, let me just give you an example here. And, of course, there are many examples. In our own province of Quebec, and also in New Brunswick, there is the prospect of the extraction of natural gas from deposits in shale. The difficulty with this is that—of course, it is great to have the availability of energy in the form of natural gas—but the process itself involves contamination of large quantities of water. So, speaking on the phone to my son-in-law, who teaches at Imperial College, in London, and whose specialty is water treatment, who is working ways of desalinating water etc., or separating water from oil—he said that the process of shale gas extraction is very "dubious" from an environmental perspective. Sometimes, the environment itself needs our defence.

Well, behind all of this is our belief that God is above all, that we are, finally, obedient to God, rather than to any earthly power, whether it be the power associated with sports, or military power, government power, power in the church, or in communities, or in the family. Power exists in all sorts of different places. But, ultimately, we are accountable to God, who is above all, and whose power is not for a short duration, but is for eternity. It is a power which is exemplified in justice and righteousness, unlike many worldly powers. We are finally obedient to it, and, on the basis of it, we are sometimes patient with worldly powers that we live with. On the basis of that, we are also attentive to those individuals or realities which are compromised or "marginalized" by the powers that be.

Right at the beginning of Luke's gospel, we hear that, "In the days of Caesar Augustus..." there was an enrolment that took place, and it required that Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem. But there, born in the manger, was one who would be king; and his dominion would last forever. Well, it's not the Caesar here who has the final word. It's our Lord God, who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. And, like the early Christians, who refused to say, "Caesar is Lord", we say, "Jesus is Lord", Lord of our lives, Lord of all the powers that be in this world.