

Tuesday Reflection 2nd June 2020

Today's Gospel from Mark (12:13-17) recounts the first of four confrontations between Jesus and some Pharisees. The Pharisees seek to lead Jesus into a trap by asking him whether it is permissible to pay taxes to Caesar, i.e. the Roman occupiers. As we know, Jesus turns the tables on them by telling them to "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what is God's".

There are various levels from which we can view this story.

To begin with, we can see it as a contest of strength between Jesus and the Pharisees, and can triumphantly observe how 'our man' 'wins' by exposing the hypocrisy of his opponents and drawing them into a potentially blasphemous situation by asking them to handle a Roman coin - the symbol of Israel's oppressors.

At a deeper level, however, it does raise the whole question of the relationship between temporal and spiritual power, and it appears that Jesus makes a distinction between them: "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what is God's". For us, who are in this world, this relationship can cast us into a variety of ethical dilemmas - as members in this world we are often called upon to take decisions in concrete political situations. This will involve making choices, and not making the choices means evading our responsibility. As Christians we will endeavour to make our decisions in line with our Faith - but we will not get it right every time.

We can dig even deeper, to a third level, which is the level of two opposing approaches, which are characterised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Ethics*. Speaking of the Pharisees, he says, "(The Pharisee)...is the man to whom only the knowledge of good and evil has come to be of importance in his entire life. Every moment of his life is a moment where he must choose between good and evil. Every action, every judgment, no matter how small, is permeated with the choice of good and evil. He can confront no person without evaluating that person in terms of good and evil. For him, all judgments are moral judgments. No gesture is immune to moral condemnation."

Jesus, on the other hand, refuses to see the world in these terms. He lightly, almost cavalierly, casts aside many of the legal distinctions the Pharisee labours to maintain. Yet there is nothing arbitrary about his behaviour. There is a simplicity and clarity. Unlike the Pharisee, he is unconcerned with the goodness or badness of those he helps, unconcerned with the personal moral worth of those he meets, talks to, dines with, or heals. He is concerned solely and entirely with the well being of another. He exhibits no other concern. He is the model of selfless action and thus the exact opposite of the Pharisee, whose every gesture is fundamentally self-reflective.

The Pharisee is concerned to divide and exclude. Jesus' sole concern is to include, to reconcile. If we had to sum up the lesson from this episode, it would be in the contrast of two small and seemingly insignificant words. The Pharisee's word is OR, Jesus' word is AND.

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