

Confounding Empire

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 October 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 20A

Matthew 22: 15-22; Exodus 33:12-23; Contemporary Reading: *Christ & Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* by Joerg Rieger

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

This story from Matthew's gospel has permeated the fabric of western culture. In the New Revised Standard Version, we heard: "*give therefore to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's and to God the things that are God's.*" Many of us will remember older words: "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.*"

The traditional interpretation of this text has been to reassure Christians that it is fine to participate in the life of the empire. That the church, God's realm, is outside the realm of day-to-day economics and politics. It is an interpretation that utterly misses the point of Jesus story for Jesus surely believed that all things belong to God.

The Gospel text is so misunderstood because it has been interpreted by a Christianity captive to the politics and military power – first of Rome and then of subsequent empires. Christians have been told that it means that it is fine to pay taxes and to obey the law of the state.

This interpretation maintained the power of the Empire and the Emperor. But both the reading from Exodus about God's glory and the Gospel proclaim loudly that there are not "*two kingdoms*", but one God who claims all of our allegiance.

The incident takes place in the Temple. Some Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus a trick question designed to get him into great danger with the Roman authorities.

In response, Jesus got the questioners to answer their own question and incriminate themselves.

In Israel at the time of Jesus, people used two different types of currency, Roman and Jewish. The Roman coins were the ones that were carved with the image of the Emperor. On them there was an inscription that read "*Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.*" Jewish people believed that God did not want them to use this money because it was a violation of the Commandment that forbade carved pictures of people or animals, graven images.

The Romans were cruel rulers, but also smart. To appease this occupied people, they let the Jews have their own coins for their business and religious affairs. These coins were imprinted with pictures of things like fruit, corn or palm branches. The main Jewish coin was a silver shekel. A special Temple half-Shekel was used to pay Temple taxes and to buy animals to sacrifice. At the Temple, moneychangers sat at tables in the Court of the Gentiles trading Roman coins for Jewish Temple money.

However, the Jews, like everyone in the Roman Empire, still had to use Roman money to pay their taxes.

The Jewish authorities kept it all quite separate. Pharisaic law would not allow Roman money to be brought into the temple. When the Pharisees produced a Roman denarius coin from their purses, Jesus was able to answer them in a way that both proclaimed the sovereignty of God and exposed their hypocrisy. And their complicity with the empire.

Just in case the onlooker had not caught the trick, Jesus asked whose “image” and inscription is on the coin? The word translated image is “eikon” in Greek.

It was a clear reference to the Commandment “*You shall not make any graven image*” (eikon).

While appearing to criticise no one, Jesus’s answer delivered a clear message to all his Jewish hearers: What to the Romans would have seemed like a harmless answer that supported the status quo, was in reality a subversive challenge to the entire political and economic system.

Now Jesus can flip back the denarius to the defeated and exposed religious leaders of Israel with a sting. Every observant Jew understood that everything and everyone belongs to God, even Caesar himself.

Three hundred years later, when the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the attitude to church and state relations changed. Jesus’ teaching began to be turned on its head and it was used to imply that Christians had duties to the state that were separable from their duties to God.

This was crystallised most clearly, centuries later, in the Reformation teaching of Luther who thought that there were two realms for human life, the church and the state. The two kingdoms. Luther taught that Christians must be obedient citizens in relation to the state. The church, on the other hand, was understood to be responsible for salvation and the spiritual life. So good Lutherans will tell us that Luther’s teaching has been abused. This is how it was understood.

Sometimes civil law and God are actually in conflict. Scholars examining the acquiescence of the German people under Hitler, have considered the role of Luther’s teachings about separation of church and state, in wondering why so many apparently good people did nothing as Hitler undertook the mass extermination of the Jewish people and the other groups like homosexual people, gypsies and disabled people that he had gassed to death.

The fact that this passage has repeatedly been used to justify complicity with oppressive governments, and been used by Christians to bless military violence, is a sad indication of the way in which Rome has continued to occupy the hearts and minds of Christians.

Quite the opposite of the equality of God and emperor, in separate realms, is implied in the text. The coins bear the image of the state but humans bear the image of God. No matter where we live and operate in the social, economic, political, or religious realms, we bear the image of God.

Wherever we are, in claiming the image of God upon us, we say that we belong to God. We belong to the source and energy of life and love. Our loyalties and behaviour should not switch when we move out of church and into the world of politics. We who call ourselves Christian are called to integrate our social, economic, political and religious lives and not keep them in separate compartments.

Being made in the image of God, believing in the sacred and living in the 21st century, means that Christians have a responsibility to the common good.

How shall I live if I truly value the life of every human being? What is my commitment to the sort of life Jesus embodied – a life that gave opportunity to every person - where every person was of equal worth – had equal chances over and above mere survival?

Questions about the relationship of church and state are being raised again in our time as the end of Marriage Postal Survey draws mercifully closer. Predictions by pollsters suggest that the Yes vote will gain about 59% support (but everyone is also conscious of Brexit and Trump – so please, tick the box and mail your survey).

At present, there is no legislation before parliament though it seems likely Dean Smith's bill will be adopted. It includes consideration of the relationship of church and state in that it emphasises the right that all clergy currently have to decide who they will or will not marry. It also sets up a new category of religious civil celebrant. This will allow celebrants whose religious convictions do not support marriage for LGBTI people to refuse to marry same sex or transgender couples, or a couple where one person has intersex status.

Smith's bill also enables religious organisations to decline goods and services to an LGBTI couple, so for example a church that rents its hall could not be required to make it available for a LGBTI wedding reception.

But, for religious conservatives, this bill does not go nearly far enough. They want any person of faith to be able to refuse to be involved in any way with the marriage of an LGBTI couple. At first glance, this may seem a reasonable accommodation of religious belief but it is in fact a very problematic proposal. And it is grounded in a misunderstanding of the relationship of church and state.

As Jesus, in his time, had to face tricky questions about the place of people of faith in the broader public life, in our time we must address questions about the balance between religious freedom on the one hand and freedom from discrimination on the other.

In a secular democracy, religious freedom necessarily has limits. Churches and religious organisations in Australia already have great license to discriminate – more so than in any other western countries – to discriminate particularly against LGBTI people in employment and service provision. This was evident when the Catholic archbishop of Melbourne said that LGBTI employees of Catholic schools or hospitals would be fired if they married when the law changed.

While he backtracked from the claim in response to public outcry, he was legally correct – that it was in the power of the church to do this.

To some, the idea that conservative bakers or photographers or registry office employees should also be able to refuse to provide goods and services for the wedding of an LGBTI couple seems reasonable.

The first response, even from progressive people is often to respond that no gay couple is going to want a cake baked by a homophobic baker anyway. This might be fine in Sydney where there are thousands of potential caterers for a wedding.

But it would be a different story in a small regional town with one baker, one florist and one reception venue.

Discrimination by individuals and non-religious organisations is against the law for good reason. Under a range of Australian laws, a business cannot discriminate on the grounds of race, religion, sex or sexual orientation because we recognise that those attributes should not impede a person's participation in civic life.

As Christians, believing that all people are made in God's image, I believe we should oppose the weakening of anti-discrimination laws when the Marriage Act is changed. That we should be guided by our commitment to the Common Good and our vision of a society where all people are treated equally.

We recognise that placing marginalised groups in the ever-present danger of being turned away is not conducive to building a tolerant and peaceful society.

By its nature, discrimination law prevents people from picking and choosing customers according to their beliefs. The law insists, rightly, that to reap the benefits of opening a business to the public, the business must be open on equal terms.

Religious freedom is the freedom to believe and to practice your faith. It is not unbridled freedom to discriminate.

Conservative Christians will be free to maintain and voice their opposition to marriage for LGBTI people and I'm sure they will do so.

But we do need to acknowledge, in this public conversation, some hypocrisy in the demands. Groups like the Australian Christian Lobby are not advocating that a Christian baker should be able to refuse to bake a cake for a couple who have previously been divorced, or for a Halloween party. They are not advocating that a business should be able to refuse to serve an inter-racial couple. The religious exemptions being sought are motivated by animus toward LGBTI people.

"Religious freedom" cannot mean that one set of beliefs ought to take precedence over another, or that religious ideas should trump nonreligious ideas.

Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights protects "*freedom of thought, conscience and religion*", and protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, and the right to profess any belief. But according to our own Australian High Court, the right to manifest religious beliefs is not absolute, and must exist in balance with other considerations.

There is no belief hierarchy where certain beliefs carry more weight than others -- beliefs are protected until they impinge on the rights of others.

Religious freedom does not just apply to those who take the Bible literally. Equally, it applies to the 60 percent of Christians who support marriage equality; to the 40 percent of LGBTQ people who are Christian, and to those who hold spiritual beliefs, those of other faiths, and people with no faith.

Promoters of the right to discriminate should be wary of unintended consequences. The hostility directed at LGBTI people by some Christians during the postal survey will surely lead to situations where LGBTI business owners would be sorely tempted not to serve Christians. And conservative Christians would undoubtedly not support the suggestion that a Muslim waiter could refuse to serve alcohol or a Catholic checkout operator refuse to sell condoms.

For those who will continue to hold deep objections to LGBTI people it is worth remembering that here is nothing in Christian faith, in the teachings of Jesus, which forbids Christians from associating with or serving people with whom they disagree.

When Jesus called us to give to God what is Gods, he called us to see the image that God sees in all people, to see our co-humanity.

This ancient Jesus story of Jesus now invites us to put our faith into practise.

Live with love,

and share in the hope that Jesus Christ brings.

Always remember that

God loves you.

You bear God's image

and God has chosen you to be God's own.

But also remember this: God loves every other being

they too bear God's image.

And are chosen to be God's own.