

*on death and taxes*  
a sermon preached on the  
*19<sup>th</sup> sunday after pentecost*  
19 October 2014  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by mother emily fraser*

the lections: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-33.

Today's gospel reading sees Jesus enter the difficult and potentially fraught arena of politics, discussing taxes, and death and resurrection. This is a particularly apt reading given that the clergy of the diocese and lay representatives from its parishes have just spent the previous four days in discussions and debates at Synod, and that our tax returns are due at the end of October.

However, I digress. In both instances, the group asking the question hope to have their own perceptions confirmed by Jesus making what they think is an error - both groups will leave disappointed, and silenced.

As we consider this passage, we learn something significant about Jesus and the way he interacted with those who came to him and asked him questions. I'll return to this later.

Firstly, a group come to speak with Jesus with an ulterior motive and a plan. They want to entice Jesus into making a statement which is anti-Roman, and encourages his disciples to disobey the powers of the Roman Empire. Such dissent would have rocked the delicate relationship between the Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire who permitted them to have that authority over the Jewish communities, and Jesus making any subversive statement would have been a tailor-made reason for the arrest of Jesus and his followers, and their persecution.

They flatter Jesus as they pose their question, but Jesus is aware of their motives and will have nothing of it. He identifies them as hypocrites, and takes them to task. He demands, in response to their question about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, that they produce the coin with which the tax is paid. It bears the name and a representation of the Emperor and Jesus declares that they, and we, should give to the Emperor the things which are the Emperors, and to God those things which are God's.

Instead of an inflammatory comment that would have played right into their hands, Jesus offers them a piece of great wisdom that acknowledges the divide seen between secular and sacred duties. In addition to this Jesus firmly indicates where our priority should lie. With God. Those things which are God's are those things on which we should focus.

Here's the major piece to consider as we go about the week - Jesus, as the Messiah, points us to God, and indicates how we can better attend to the call of God in our lives. That is the very meaning of the incarnation, Christ's becoming fully human so that we might know the Divine.

As a result, the critics are silenced and Jesus has made his point beyond doubt.

A second encounter follows closely, and, rather than a question of politics, Jesus now faces a question of belief, all about bodily resurrection. The questioners are said to disbelieve in the resurrection, and the example they offer Jesus could be said to be one of those questions which is specifically to be as pedantic a question as

possible in order to make it tricky to answer easily or well, and show the scenario to be as odd and non-sensical as possible.

Using example of Jewish marriage law and raising the question of the resurrection, Jesus is asked for the verdict as to whose wife the woman will be in the resurrection, given her seven marriages, and his answer is eagerly awaited.

Just as in the previous scenario, Jesus gives them an answer, and it's not the answer they expected. In his reply Jesus bluntly tells them that they have misunderstood the whole issue - that they understand neither scripture nor God - and once more indicates that there's something more important to think about.

He explains the difference between resurrection life and the life we have now - "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." Therefore the question of wife and husbands is moot, because resurrection life is unlike earthly life and such worldly connections and relationships are left behind.

He then speaks further about the resurrection, which his hearers are said to disbelieve, and to my mind is the reason they ask their detailed hypothetical question - they want to know what Jesus means when he speaks of the resurrection and what it might be.

As they proposed their question citing the law of Moses, Jesus reminds them that the God of whom we speak is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob - and more than that is "God not of the dead, but of the living". He grounds his response thoroughly within the ancient law and the figures of Jewish wisdom and tradition.

From a preoccupation with death, Jesus brings them around to an emphasis on new life. Jesus states and then reinforces that God is a God of the living, not the dead. God is a God in whom we can hope and trust, both now and into the future, with confidence

So what do we, here and now, take from these stories? What do we see in Jesus response that we can carry with us in the next few days?

Ultimately, these two interactions between Jesus and the crowds in Matthew's gospel show us a Jesus who listens, who understands the underlying significance of the questions posed to him, and then, as the Messiah, points us to God and a greater understanding of God.

Jesus was ready to answer the questions put to him with wisdom and truth, even when those who asked them had sinister motives in doing so, and he was able to show them he knew their intentions and could turn this moment of confrontation, into a life-giving moment of learning which draws us all closer to God.

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