HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 29 YEAR A

22 OCTOBER 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

The episode in today’s Gospel according to Matthew, takes place towards the end of Jesus’ ministry; it is situated in the Temple in Jerusalem and is a part of a series of acrimonious exchanges intended to catch Jesus out. He is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar; if he answers yes he can be exposed as a collaborator and an opponent of Jewish religion, but if he answers no he is exposed as a zealous revolutionary. Jesus chooses not to quibble that the question is one that his interrogators themselves surely have to answer.

Instead famously he takes the example of a coin used to pay the tax and he asks whose head it bears? To the answer that it is Caesar’s, he responds in the punchline: so pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. Money which we need to live bears the image of the emperor, so it is right to pay taxes to the Emperor.

This may seem a rather slender foundation upon which to build a whole political theology, but it is true that other parts of the New Testament suggest that Christians should seek to live well in civil society. So in the first letter of Peter first century Christians are told to ‘honour the emperor’ and Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 13 reminds Christians to pay their taxes. Not to see pagan rulers automatically as the enemy to be opposed is already prepared, as we heard in the first reading from the time of the Jewish Exile, by Second Isaiah who describes Cyrus, pagan Persian king, as the Lord’s anointed, who though he does not know it and does not know God is revered even with the title ‘Christ’ because he does the will of God, enabling the Jewish people to return to their homeland.

Of course the trouble is that political powers in biblical times – including the kings of Israel let alone the rulers of Israel’s neighbours, usually wicked, and Roman emperors, viewed as the Antichrist in the book of Revelation, to say nothing of a whole procession of rulers through church history, are not always viewed from the perspective of God’s people as in fact doing God’s will. Particularly not when they brutally persecute God’s people and are guilty of substantial and indeed terrible injustices. At the risk of trying to solve a complicated issue too quickly and simplistically, one may note and respect the command to pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar, while at the same time noting that this command may not lead to an absolute and unconditional obedience.

An equally intriguing issue, maybe more so, arises from the unanswered question, the implication left hanging in the second part of Jesus’ retort: pay to God what belongs to God. A coin bears the image of the Emperor, but what bears the image of God? Of course mankind is in the image of God; so we pay our money to the Emperor, but we pay ourselves to God, an altogether deeper and more profound obligation and one which does lead us to an absolute and unconditional obedience.

What do we owe God? No reader or listener of Matthew’s Gospel hardly can have reached this stage of the gospel and not have an inkling of what the answer is, though as the parables and images of recent weeks have shown us, often this is presented in a hidden and implicit way. Time is running out for Matthew and in a few verses, we will have the point put with unmistakeable clarity and brevity in the summary of the law – it will be next week’s gospel. We who bear the image of God pay our due to him in the one law of love which comes in the two forms of love of God and love of neighbour. One is reminded of the disciples at the Last Supper according to John: ‘Now this is plain speaking’.

We had it too in this morning’s second reading from St Paul to the Thessalonians, using Paul’s familiar three great virtues: ‘[we constantly remember] how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope’. Yet the paying of this due is something much more than the niggardly and resentful, it may be, measuring out of an earthly tax. Perhaps one of the most moving of gospel stories, not in Matthew as it happens, but in both Mark and Luke, also comes from right at the end of the story before the Passion in the Temple in Jerusalem, the widow’s mite: the two small coins adding up to a penny which Jesus observes an old and indigent widow putting into the temple treasury, leading him to comment that she puts in more than everyone else, because she puts in everything she has to live on. This tax owed to God is not to be a niggardly payment, but the generous giving to God of all we are and have, the payment to him who has given us first, who are his image, himself in his total self-giving to us.

The unmistakeable Eucharistic tone of this, we are to give ourselves as he has given himself, is caught so powerfully by St Paul in his letter to the Philippians when he writes: ‘Indeed even if my blood has to be poured out as a libation over your sacrifice and the offering of your faith, then I shall be glad and join in your rejoicing’ and in I Timothy: ‘As for me’ Paul writes ‘my life is already being poured away as a libation and the time has come for me to depart’. This pouring out of his whole life, a widow’s mite, as a tax due, as a sacrifice by the apostle, is of course founded upon, enabled by and returns to the pouring out of him who says in all the synoptic gospels at the Last Supper: ‘this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’.