

November 12, 2017 Church And State Luke 20:15-22

Recently, a friend passed on a copy of a coffee table book on Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. His reason for passing it on to me, was the fact which he knew, that we had been to the Holy Land twice, and therefore would find it more meaningful than anyone else he knew. The second I was handed the book, I cracked it open. I was not looking for something specific, but there on that chance page was the photograph of a Roman coin. Two photographs actually, side by side, showing what we call the heads image on the one hand, and the tails inscription on the other. It bore the image of Octavius Caesar. The inscription on the tails side of the coin told the story of the coins coming into existence in terms of the year of Octavius serving in the office of Emperor.

It may seem like a little detail. But its significance is brought to light in Luke 20 as Jesus answers the question put to him by people who were not nearly so interested in an accurate answer, as they were in discovering something that could provide a basis for a serious legal charge....hopefully, that Jesus was critical of the Empire centered in Rome. As Luke tells us this was a put up job. The questioner was seeking evidence of a crime. The assumption behind the question is that Jesus can be had. He is recognized as a religious person, a Jewish person. HE is expected to be careless when it comes to talking about the Gentile dominated Empire that has annexed, and occupied Judea.

“Teacher,” they began, “We know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” When Jesus’ questioner said “we know you teach what is right,” he meant, you regard the Scriptures of the Old Testament as the ultimate authority for living a Godly life. The desire was that Jesus be assured HE was expected to come down on the special nature of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. The phrasing of the question encourages Jesus to go out on a limb. After all, Jesus is among friends. Even Luke could see that was not the case. This man and his group were spies. Duplicity is what they are about. They are not seekers after truth at all.

Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? If Jesus says “Yes” his own people will be disappointed in HIM. If He says “No!” HE will clearly be guilty of a crime against the Empire and the Empire will deal with HIM as a rebel, and HIS ministry as well as HIS life will be at an end. It must have appeared to be a simple matter. But Jesus said neither “Yes” nor “NO!” HE asked to see a denarius. A Roman coin.

When the coin was produced so that Jesus could see it, HE asked a question of HIS own. “Whose portrait and inscription are on it?” Well than was a no brainer. It’s a denarius! There can only be one answer. Caesar’s. Heads: Caesar’s portrait. Tails: Caesar’s name, the year of his administration’s production of the coin. So?

Then comes the blockbuster. “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. Luke provides us with 2 more details often overlooked in dealing with this confrontation. Jesus said it clearly, loud enough to be heard by everyone who was present. It was a very public statement. And these spies, seeking to find evidence against HIM, fell to silence. They learned something. Getting legitimate evidence against Jesus was not going to be easy to do.

A legitimate question. What is so significant about a Roman coin that it would become the basis for a message on Remembrance Sunday. Actually it goes to the heart of the question of serving Canada in a time of war. It goes to the heart of the question of what does a disciple of Jesus do, when the government states its need of young men to bare arms, aware that they may die in the midst of service. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.” In fact Jesus said that day, it is not a matter that can easily or lightly be refused. The state may need your body, as much as God wants your soul.

What Jesus said very clearly, is that we cannot expect to receive the benefits of the state without having to pay a price for those same benefits. And that does not mean we may conduct ourselves as though God does not exist, or as though anything can be done because one carries the weapons and wears the uniform of the nation that enlists us into service. Jesus understands citizenship on earth better than we often do.

In these words, spoken before the crowd and heard by the disciples HE has not opened the door to conscientious objection. And yet Jesus has also not let us loose to serve the beast, even in a time of war.

I fell in love with a movie called “Glory” years ago. It tells the story of the raising of the first all black regiment to serve the Union during the American Civil War. A regiment in which almost all of the blacks who enlisted were slaves. Their commanding officer was white. His assistants were white. At one point a young black trainee is offered the honour of bearing the flag as they go into combat. He politely, turns down the honour. He and his regimental commander discuss the matter at some length. The young black soldier has figured things out pretty well. There is going to be a lot of killing done on the battlefield. No one on either side will have clean hands. What he has come to understand is the fact that being free, comes at a terrible price. He understands that the likelihood of his losing his life in battle for the fortress at Charleston, is part of that cost. Giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

Are we not tempted to balk at the opportunities to serve in political office. And I realize a lot of us can say we are too old to do so. Who would even want us? And do not misunderstand me...I am not suggesting you should all rush out and plan to run for parliament. Although I did once suggest in song that the Canadian Senate would benefit from the service of our Board Chairman. My point is simply, that citizenship

requires that a cost be paid. And very often that cost cannot be reduced to a matter of dollars and cents. There are times, and we have lived through a number of them, when the cost has had to be paid in blood and lives.

And as Jesus said so eloquently, serving the nation in which we live does not mean we do not have to serve the Lord God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, at the same time...and that too comes at a cost....a price to be paid.

My reading and study material recently has reminded me that the disciples of Jesus, have never been ideal or perfect. One author comments he is attracted to Jesus, but these disciples of his are sometimes as much use to HIM and HIS cause as a hole in the head. And it is true that the church regardless of whether you spell that with a capital C or small c, does not have an unblemished record of service to God and man.

And yet, only the church has made it important to make the point that children are not a disposable commodity. Only the church has lifted women up acknowledging it is wrong to think of women as property. The church is the reason that slavery is illegal in the west. The church is the reason many people accept the principle that all people are created equal by the living God. Orphanages, Public Education, and Hospitals came out of the church's attempts to render unto God what is God's...caring, loving, faithful service.

On this day, in this place, at this moment in the year, we bare a burden of remembrance. As disciples of Jesus, we have heard the words that Jesus spoke in public, that stymied opposition for a moment at least.... "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's". Both citizenship on earth, and citizenship in heaven are bought dearly. Somehow putting our lives and our souls on the line we must pay what it costs to serve both, Church and Nation. Nation and Church.

Let us pray;

Lord if people who believe are silent, or do nothing, or just criticize, little of consequence will result. Help us to serve Canada, the government in Ottawa and Toronto and here in Stirling-Rawdon. Also help us to serve you, and the people whose needs and cares you cause us to learn about. Grant that we may recognize that both require significant giving of our lives and energy and substance. Make us instruments well used in the building of a better, and a believing world. In Jesus name we pray. Amen