

Sermon: 2020/10/18 (20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) - *Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22_BTR*

[Ask for children to come forward. Portable burner; marshmallows.]

Title: Caramelized by God's Presence

If I put this marshmallow straight into this flame, and held it there too long - what would happen?

(To the marshmallow.)

[Wait for response.]

Right!

It would burn.

Eventually, there would be nothing left of the marshmallow: it would be only ash and smoke

- *and horrid to eat!*

Yuk.

Gross.

But if I hold it only *near* to the (hot) flame

- *and just for a short while(!)* -

the marshmallow isn't destroyed; just gently *caramelised*

- its flavour and texture become much improved from what it was.

So, why do I mention this?

Well, in (the Book of) *Exodus* this morning, we see that Moses was really keen to get close to God.

He wanted *intimacy* with God.

But there was a problem.

God is really, *really* holy.

His holiness was like a burning white light!

So God hid Moses in a large crack in the face of the mountain as he 'passed by':

[Ex. 33:22].

And this *changed* Moses - it made him glow! [Ex. 34:29f.]

And forever more afterwards, he had to wear a mask because his face shone with

a hint of God's glory. [v.33b-35]

Let's pray:

Father God, we - like Moses, want to be near you - we want a relationship with you. Send your Holy Spirit, we pray, to change us by your presence - *to improve us* by your holy presence, amen.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

Title: The Presidential Election, 2020

'Then [Jesus] said to them: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'" [Mt. 22:21]

But, I ask: "'[G]ive' *what* exactly?

"What" 'things' 'are the emperor's'?

What *did* Jesus think the Pharisees - with whom He was conversing - owed Caesar, king of the Romans?

(The colonial, pagan oppressor of Palestine.)

And consider, *it is certain* that Jesus is speaking here of 'the emperor' as a representative of political power-holders *generally*.

That is to say, Jesus wasn't just offering His audience a teaching specific to that (ancient) time and place; rather, He is offering *us* something *timeless*.

- a lesson about how we *Christians* should regard our national leaders *today*.

I think that that is clear - that Jesus' meaning is a *universal* one - about the stance the Church is called to adopt vis-a-vis secular government in every age, and vis-a-vis the executive "branch" in particular.

And I think this because of how He *consistently* neglects to name the *actual* person in question - Tiberius Claudius Nero^[n.1] - and instead speaks only of the office itself - the office of 'emperor'.

This is a *philosophical* question, then - a question about *principle*, and Jesus' concern was to expound on something of fundamental importance - one which looms very large this morning given that our presidential election is fast approaching: only 16 days to go.

Allow me, then, to rephrase the question:

"What do *we* - the electorate; the citizenry - "owe" the candidates?"

I'll refine that more:

What does Jesus - the omniscient God in human form - think Americans ought 'give' Donald Trump or his opponent, Joe Biden?

Let me be even more pointed and direct: To *who* does Jesus - the omniscient God in human form - think you *ought* to 'give' your vote, if at all?

Now, Caesar, said Jesus, deserved to be "given" his 'denarius' - that was the currency in use (back then), like the dollar.

Caesar was to be given this even by the Jewish people who were his enemies - because their taxes - the "denarii" in their purses - paid for goods and services that they were using, which the Imperial state - *Caesar's state* - supplied.

"Goods and services" such as paved roads, properly engineered, designed and maintained - with drainage and signage and so on.

"Goods and services" such as an unprecedented level of security and stability in the empire.

(Yes, in Galilee, in Jesus' day, there was quite a lot of brigandage and highway robbery.

Just think of the scene depicted in the parable of the Good Samaritan: [Lk. 10:25-37].

We know too - the historians tell us - that there were false messiahs roaming the countryside;

that there were incidences of terrorism perpetrated in the major cities of Judea by the "Zealots" - public assassinations of public-figures.

But, by-and-large, there was peace and safety under the Romans that was remarkable for the period.

The unrest among the Jews was a peculiar result largely of their millenarian expectations - there were many agitators stirring up crowds claiming the End of the World was imminent.

And, in a sense, of course, these charlatans were right:

the Son of God Himself - *Christ* - was, in fact, walking among them.)

There was "goods and services" such as efficient, well-run, modern, stone-built harbours and emporia - bringing in food-stuffs and items from faraway regions.

"Goods and services" such as aqueducts and viaducts.

All these things were benefitting the Pharisees and their countrymen, and Caesar, 'the emperor', was the one (ultimately) responsible.

To 'give' him back the very coins he minted, therefore, from the silver-mines he also protected, was simply the right. Thing. To. Do.

This is the point Jesus is making and it "feeds into" a larger matter about what it means to be a good person:

which is if you owe someone a debt, *pay it*. [See, e.g.: 2 Kgs. 4:7; Ps. 37:21; Rm. 13:7, etc.]

That's basic ethics right there.

"Morality 101."

Should *more* than this be given to 'the emperor', though?

Here, Jesus says nothing.

He is silent.

And this seems to be because the Pharisees, Matthew tells us - who was present - were looking to 'entrap' the Lord, and they were looking to 'entrap' Him by either, *one* hoping to portray Him as a traitorous enthusiast for the hated Romans, despite all the benefits that their governance had brought to the Jews, and in so doing make Him a pariah among His own kin.

Or, *two*, they were hoping to report on Him to the Romans as a seditious trouble-maker should Jesus have taught for withholding taxes.

Well, we see that He didn't say to do that; He didn't say to withhold taxes: *absolutely* the reverse.

But what Jesus' example of silence beyond the question of taxation does is to deliberately introduce ambiguity into the discussion about the reality that there even was a Caesar, (irrespective of who it was).

Jesus *does not* endorse such a "thing" - 'the emperor' - as one that *should* be "in charge."

Jesus does *not* say that a Caesar, 'the emperor', was one who *deserved* support, or was one who *deserved* the influence and status that he enjoyed.

Those 'things' are something else.

No one who was listening to Jesus was indebted to 'give' *that* to such a person. Only Jesus - *only the Creator* - is entitled to those 'things' - to (whole-hearted) support, influence and status.

Which brings me back to the question of to whom you and I should give *our* enthusiasm or support to this November.

On which "ticket"; on which party; on which pair or personalities *ought* Christians to bestow influence and status in the role of leader of the most powerful country in the world?

If you think the answer is obvious, you're fooling yourself.

Ambiguity and complexity abounds.

Because the *real* answer - the Scriptures reveal - is *neither*; not really; not ever.

Which is *not* to say that they're *equally* bad: they're not!

But *certainly* the choice is between the lesser of two evils.

So, having prayed and given this question much thought, I think it is my role to do at least this:

I think it is my role to remind you of *two* 'things'

- "two 'things'" *beyond*, of course, your overriding duty to God and His "Great Commission."

And the commitments that that duty entails.

- a commitment to human life, which is made in God's image from conception, *and* which requires structures and laws to protect its flourishing at every stage afterward.

Firstly, I believe I need to remind you that "spoiling a ballot" or simply refraining

from voting *period* is a *venerable* tradition among Jesus' followers:
The Apostolic and Early Church was almost *altogether* (completely) *un*-interested in politics and in politicians.

And not because the first congregations fled the cities for remote areas where they didn't have to be concerned about who "Wore the Purple." - that's a metaphor for who occupied the throne.

Oh no:

"the first congregations" were *deeply* embedded in the metropolises of the Classical World

- in Greece, in Italy, in Egypt, Asia Minor and Syria.

That is to say, the men and women, boys and girls of "the first congregations" lived in the *heart* of the places where the "dirty" game of politics was played, and where its effects were felt.

(The "effects" of poor or good government.)

But, just like Pontius Pilate, they themselves "washed their hands" of involvement in the decision-making, choosing to make the best go of it whatever the circumstances. [See Mt. 27:24]

And right now, I can tell you, there are some in this very county - Warren County - who are not giving the presidential "race" much thought at all.

The Anabaptists - that's the various and many denominations of Amish and the Mennonites;

some of the 'Churches of Christ';

and others

are, unlike me, not losing a "wink" of sleep about what to do on the 3rd.

Because they have embraced this "venerable" a-political perspective.

Do not, then, my friends, disregard abstaining from the election as a genuine option for expressing your deepest Christian commitments with integrity.

Secondly, do not be "sucked into" the binary presentation of this election.

That it is black and white;

this one "tribe" over here versus that one "tribe" over there.

A fight between donkeys and elephants.

I saw a tweet describing it as a competition merely between two grumpy white grandpas.

(It was a reaction to their first debate.)

And though it might *appear* like that - "Ying" or "Yang," in reality there are, in addition, *alternative* candidates to consider, whose "platform" and character *and vision* may be, in fact, a better choice for the Faithful.

I urge you, then, if you haven't voted already, to lend interest and your curiosity to the likes of Kayne West;

to Brian Carroll of the A.S.P;

to Jo Jorgensen;

and to Alyson Kennedy.

The authority, you see, wielded by the resident at the White House is God-given. (Just as it is in the Palace of Westminster, the Bundestag or the Élysée.)

Saint Paul tells us that: [Rm. 13:1]

Earthly government *is* a *dim* reflection of Heavenly government. [See: 1 Cor. 13:12]

'[G]ive' it its due as such, therefore, *but no more*:

True justice;

true life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are to be found in the Savior,

in His sacrifice,

and in His service.

And I pray that each one of you will consciously seek the Holy Spirit's assistance in making a sober, holy *and informed* choice.

- a choice not swayed or determined by exaggerated promises or manipulative rhetoric,

nor by your personal or familial history of affiliation.

But a choice that *sincerely* seeks national outcomes and social arrangements that will be most pleasing to God.

Glory to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiberius>.