

## Trinity 17

'Give unto Caesar the things that Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'.

What can one say by way of comment on these words, amongst the best-known of all Jesus's responses to the many questions put to him in the course of his ministry, words that (understandably) reduced his questioners to silence? Clearly, it was impossible for them to deny that Caesar, i.e., the Roman authorities, had a legal right to impose taxes. But, as everyone there knew, Caesar's right to impose taxes was a result of military conquest. Right, in this case, was founded in might. And in that world, in that time, this was in the order of things. When, in our Old Testament lesson, God says to the King of Persia that 'I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places', this is really nothing more than a rather poetic way of saying that, as a result of his military conquests and as a reward for freeing the Jews from their exile in Babylon, he would have the right to exploit mineral deposits in the land he had conquered. Caesar too had his poets, ready to sing the imperial order as a gracious gift to the world, but Jesus and his questioners knew what that looked like from the side of the losers. They could not deny Caesar's rights—but they knew where they came from.

When these words are quoted today—as through much of Christian history—they are mostly quoted in relation to the question of Church and State or, putting it more broadly, sacred and secular. What belongs to Caesar and what to God? What are the limits of state power vis-à-vis the Church? As many of you know, I'm a regular visitor to Denmark, where they've just had a general election, won by a left-of-centre coalition. In his first press statement, the new minister for Church Affairs (yes, they have one over there) has announced that he wants parliament to pass a law giving every member of the national Church the right to be married in Church. That is—everybody, as in hetero- and homosexual couples. Parliamentary law, in other words, is to require the Church to accept gay marriage. This, I think suggests a very different view of the relationship between Church and state, sacred and secular from what is normal in Britain.

Most of those in the Church of England who wish to see the Church open up to a more inclusive attitude and to affirm the possibility of gay marriage probably wouldn't want to see this happening as a result of parliamentary legislation in which the Church itself had no direct say. Painful, divisive, and protracted as the debate may be, those on all sides (I think) would probably agree that it is a matter for the Church as Church to decide. Yet what is happening in Denmark is, in a sense, very much in line with the thinking that governed the original establishment of the Church of England, thinking that conceded to the sovereign the right to legislate for all aspects of the outward practice of religion, leaving conscience alone to the spiritual realm. And although the English Church today has its own parliament, the general synod, where all matters of doctrine, discipline, and internal governance get debated and (eventually) decided upon, everything that synod might decide is constrained by the laws of the land, laws which hold for every other religious community too. Whatever rights the Church may enjoy, are, in practice, the rights that the sovereign power—in Britain the Queen in parliament—decides to bestow. That power, its source, its form, and its practice, is, of course, very differently conceived and—thank God—very differently executed from Caesar's power. Yet it is, in its own way, a descendant of Caesar's power. Our society, like Roman society, tacitly accepts a vision of the world in which it is ultimately might that determines right, in which, in practice if not in theory, it is Caesar's values that are honoured and held up for emulation. This is what we call being 'realistic' about human nature.

Caesar's greatness was, in the first instance, his greatness in war, a greatness he celebrated in his imperial triumphs. And this greatness gave him also greatness in the distribution of land and wealth, in the patronage of art, religion and learning, in the bestowal of trading rights and monopolies—what his Renaissance descendants would call 'magnificence'. 'What is Caesar's', then, meant much more than a particular line in the tax return. 'What is Caesar's' meant a whole vision of the world in which military potency, displays of wealth and patronage, success in business and politics, achievements in arts, letters, and sciences, in short, public recognition that one had become one of the great and good, was what, finally, counted.

Now if the words ‘Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s’ were intended as a contribution to the perennial debate about relations between Church and state, one has to say that they are so far from answering that question as merely to raise it in an especially memorable and provocative way. Nor are things any better if we explain the obscurity—or apparent obscurity—of the saying as just a means of obfuscating the issue, confusing the questioners, and reducing them to silence. No, what Jesus was saying was something much more important and much more dramatic. He was in fact issuing a very direct challenge to Caesar and to the vision and the values embodied in that one, powerful word ‘Caesar’. These are the values he would elsewhere call ‘Mammon’ and of which he said ‘You cannot serve God and Mammon’. ‘Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s’—that is, let those who want victories, parades, wealth, awards, recognition, distinctions; who want the fast-track routes to money and power; the VIP seats at games, concerts and banquets; let those who want all these things seek after them—and doubtless they will get what they are looking for if they are talented, or lucky, or ruthless enough. That is what the pagans seek and always have sought. But you are to seek the things of God and Him only shall you serve.

No one of us can tell any other one of us how, more particularly, he or she is to serve God, for the will of God is found only in much prayer, in self-examination, in fear and trembling, in wilderness wanderings and Gethsemane hours. That is the truth, and there are no short cuts, easy methods, or fast-tracks. It takes a whole lifetime, never anything less, to find out what God is asking of you. Faced with that, the things of Caesar’s may at first sound rather more attractive. Amongst Caesar and his modern friends, you will undoubtedly be able to make friends and influence people, be a part of history and have a rich and fulfilling life, with glowing obituaries and fulsome eulogies to follow. With God, you can be sure of nothing: that is, nothing except the unconditional certainty of God’s particular love and closeness to absolutely each and every one of us. But what awards, recognition, or distinctions could ever even begin to compete with God’s recognizing each and every one of us as his beloved? What, really, do we have to seek, other than ways of giving thanks for all we have already received?

As Caesar celebrated his greatest triumphs, small groups of humble, marginal men and women across the empire, were meeting in secret, reading their books, singing songs, and exchanging letters. Most of them remain unknown to history and many died miserable deaths. They were not great. But as they greeted each other with words of grace and peace and called each other to give thanks in all things and always and in everything to rejoice, they created words in which we today can learn how to free ourselves from the tyranny of Caesar's continuing power and start to learn what it might mean for us to give unto God the things that are God's.