

Sermon
20 Pentecost—Proper 24-A-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
October 18, 2020
William Bradbury

Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96:1-9, (10-13)
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

In year 63 BCE, Roman general Pompey the Great lay siege to Jerusalem and after a number of months conquered the city and its Temple. Judea remained somewhat autonomous until AD 6 when Rome took more direct control and began levying a tax against the people, paid for with Roman coins with an image of Caesar and the words around the image: "Son of God, High Priest."

Jews rightly saw this as a direct violation of the commandment not to make any graven image of God and there were numerous uprisings, which led to multiple crucifixions of Jewish rebels.

In order to get ourselves into the context of this encounter, we have to go further back than our conflicted feelings about the IRS and the taxes we have to pay. We must go back to the Revolutionary War and the famous phrase: "no taxation without representation". In Boston they threw tea into the harbor as an act of rebellion.

When Jesus casts out the moneychangers from the Temple, many wonder if he is starting a violent revolution. Is he, like many of the Pharisees, in favor of not paying the tax and openly rebelling against the empire?

Or is Jesus, like the Temple leadership (the Herodians), in favor of paying the tax in order to keep the status quo with Rome to protect the comfortable lifestyle of the elite?

What Jesus says, in the King James Version, is:

"Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

It is clear Jesus is not in favor of fomenting a violent overthrow of the Roman governor: violence is not God's way and Jesus knows it will lead to thousands of crucifixions and the utter destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, which is what happens in AD 70.

But, then, what does it mean to render unto God that which is God's?

Human beings carry God's image, so we belong to God. Therefore, Jesus is calling us to give ourselves to God and God's worship and service—to pledge our allegiance to our creator and redeemer. To once again go with the grain of the universe.

 This all may sound boringly obvious until we look what happens when followers of Jesus pledge their allegiance to that which is not God:

In Nazi Germany the worship of God, Leader, and Nation are melded together: As one historian puts it, "Church leaders and theologians channeled Nazi propaganda into visual symbols, placing a swastika on the altar or a banner hanging from the church ceiling"

Unlike the Soviet Union that tried to get rid of God, the Nazis coopted God for their murderous nationalist agenda and the German people blindly go along with it because Hitler was raising their standard of living and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat for their problems.

From his baptism to his last breath on the cross, Jesus's central message is the inbreaking of the Realm of God. Jesus reveals God as healer, forgiver, and builder of a non-violent, inclusive community of compassion and justice. Jesus calls us to give our lives to God and God's community.

This means that retiring to the hills and letting our country burn up, literally and figuratively, is not an option for those who are in Christ.

Jesus calls us to the much harder path called the Way of the Cross. The Way of selfless service committed in Christ to building communities of hope.

 I was listening an interview to with Brian McLaren, a leader in transforming faith, and he said there were three kinds of hope people are holding:

Cheap Hope: these are the folks who think everything's going to be ok, that things will automatically return to how they've always been. **Therefore, there's nothing new we need to do.** We can just sit back and be passive and everything will be okay: They think the pandemic, climate crisis, racial injustice, and political unrest will automatically calm down like a hyperactive child who finally runs out of energy and falls asleep. **Cheap Hope.**

Then on the other side of the spectrum there is what he calls, **Dead Hope**: these folks believe everything is hopeless: everything is going to keep getting worse: our country will devolve from a republic where leaders honor their commitment to the Constitution into a place where the chief concern is getting reelected and the rich getting richer. It's too late to fix things, so there is no need to try: **Dead Hope**.

Dead Hope and Cheap Hope, while having very different visions of the future, both say there is nothing we can do and God, if there is one, is on the other side of the universe playing computer games.

But then Maclaren says there is a third alternative he sees and he calls it **Deep Hope**. Deep Hope sees and acknowledges the severity of our medical, political, and cosmic situation and doesn't know if everything will be okay. **But those with Deep Hope live the wisest and right way because God is with us and is working in our midst**. Even if it's hard to see the results, they're doing the right thing, because it is the right thing and in line with what they see Christ is still doing.

In Deep Hope the future is open and we get to participate in its formation. Nomad Podcast September 25, 2019

Think about it: Nothing could have been more hopeless than that Friday afternoon when Rome crucifies Jesus. **The disciples should have crawled away never to be heard from again for their hope was dead.**

But then Sunday comes and very ordinary women and men are transformed by the light of the glory of God in the face of the Risen Christ. **And because of the presence of the Spirit their faith, hope, and love goes throughout the Roman Empire transforming it from the inside out**, so that 20 years later there is a small church in Thessalonica in northern Greece to which Paul would write and say: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord Jesus, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers...."

My sisters and brothers—Now is our time to receive the Word with joy and inspired by the Holy Spirit, to become an example to all believers of the Hope that is ours in Jesus Christ.