

Sermon for Zion, February 23, 2020

Hymns: 293 - Come, thou almighty King; 637 – Take my life and let it be;
494 – Lord, Be Thy Word; 801 – From Ocean Unto Ocean

Scripture: Luke 20:20-26; Philippians 3:20-21; Galatians 3:26-28

Sermon Title: Caesar and God

Luke 20:20-26 (NIV)

Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him: “Teacher, 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?”

He saw through their duplicity and said to them, “Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

He said to them, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

Philippians 3:20-21 (NIV)

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Galatians 3:26-28 (NIV)

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It is Tax Time! Time to gather your T4s and your T4As and your charitable donation receipts and cobble together what you hope will be regarded by Revenue Canada as an adequate response to their demand for your money, or hopefully, for your humble request that they give a tiny bit of your money back. As an average Canadian, 42.5 percent of your income goes to taxes – that’s Income Tax plus Property Tax plus Sales Tax plus Carbon Tax and the rest. Yay!

It may comfort you to know that when it comes to paying taxes, we're no different than the people of Jesus' day. They didn't like paying taxes either. And they had lots of taxes to pay. Some estimate that a Jewish family circa 30 AD paid approximately 49 percent of its annual income to tax: 32 percent to the Romans (19 percent on crops; 10 percent on sales, income, and other taxes, and a 3 percent Head Tax just for the privilege of being alive), 12 percent to Jewish taxes (8 percent on crops and 4 percent on temple and sacrifice taxes), and 5 percent on forced extractions from corrupt officials. Take away that last 5 percent, since in Canada we don't have any corrupt officials (ahem) and you've got a figure pretty close to our own. The difference being, we pay, in historical terms, comparatively little for food and lodging, whereas once your average Judean paid out his tax bill, his remaining 50 percent wouldn't buy the groceries or maintain the shelter his family would need. When you're living on the edge, as were the majority, 50 percent taxation can and did push you over into true crushing poverty.

Things were so tight that when Jesus was just a boy, and the Romans came in with a census to establish yet another set of taxes, a revolt erupted in Galilee, led by a fellow named Judas the Galilean, which was inevitably put down in typical brutal Roman fashion. And now, and not coincidentally, here's another Galilean, this one named Jesus, and his religious opponents are looking to trip him up, and what better way than to get him to talk about taxes. Namely, *"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

A loaded question, given the background. By paying taxes to Caesar, weren't you in effect supporting the brutal oppression of Israel by Pagan Rome? Aren't your taxes paying for the very soldiers oppressing our people? Isn't every drachma putting another sword in another Roman hand?

Were Jesus to say, "No, we shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, because Rome is an illegitimate occupier and an oppressor of our people, and we shouldn't financially support their evil and corrupt regime," well, then, word gets to the Governor, Pilate, that we have another Judas of Galilee on our hands, preaching rebellion against Rome, and there's the Jesus problem solved, he and his followers both, with the pointy end of a Roman sword.

On the other hand, if Jesus says, "Yes, we should all pay our taxes like good and faithful subjects of Rome," suddenly, his audience gets smaller and smaller, as people on the street, crippled and crushed by Roman taxation, begin to view Jesus as just another mouthpiece of Caesar.

What's Jesus to do? What Jesus does, of course, is outwit them all. "Who has a denarius in their pocket?" A denarius was a silver coin, minted by Rome, and the standard of currency throughout the empire, worth about a day or day and a half labourer's wage. Like our coins, it has a picture of the monarch stamped on one side, and something symbolic on the reverse. In Jesus' day, you had the image of Tiberius with the writing, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." On the reverse, you had a picture of Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, with the Latin inscription "High Priest." The coin was a symbol of the wealth, power and pagan roots of Rome.

"Who's got one?" said Jesus. People dig through their pockets, and they hand one to Jesus. "And who's image is stamped on it?" he asks. "Caesar's," they reply. "I guess you'd better give it back to him, then, he might be looking for it," says Jesus, drawing a laugh. But then he looks them in the eye. "In fact, *give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.*"

Put it another way: "The coin is made in the image of Caesar. You are made in the image of God. There are things you have which belong to Caesar. But you yourself belong to God."

Another way again: We live in a society which demands of us, as citizens, a certain degree of participation: taxes, voting, obeying the law. But ultimately, we belong to God, to whom we owe life itself; to whom we owe who we are. And that demands of us complete allegiance, even as we function as citizens of the world. It's a tension which is difficult to maintain – at times, close to impossible to maintain. But you can count on this: when these two realms become confused, bad things happen. Let me explain with a most personal story, elements of which I may have shared before. This past week marked the 30th anniversary of my father's death, and both he and this story have been on my mind.

My father was born and raised in Braunschweig, a large German city midway between Frankfurt and Berlin. He was baptised in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the denomination which was the State Church in the province of Lower Saxony. His neighbourhood church was called St. Peter's, or Petrikerche. And, like almost all boys of his age, he underwent two years of instruction leading up to his confirmation, at age 15, in 1937. We have a family photograph of that event, showing the interior of Petrikerche. It isn't a very good photo, just a tiny snapshot, but it contains enough information to make your heart stop and your jaw drop and your blood run cold. Because just there, on the left hand side, is a flag. And on that flag is a swastika.

What on earth was a swastika doing in a church? Well, it was the county's political flag, in much the same as these flags hanging in Zion represent our country and province and even branches of our armed forces. A flag in church was a sign of patriotism. It didn't mean that everyone in that church, or who went to that church, was a Nazi, any more than flying a Provincial flag means everyone here is a PEI Conservative, or that a Canadian flag in our church means everyone is a member of the Liberal Party of Canada. Not all Germans were Nazis, for various reasons, in the same way not all Canadians belong to whichever political party has formed the government. My father's parents were not aligned with the Nazi party on the basis of social class. Many (not all) of the higher social classes in Germany considered the Nazis to be lower-class thugs, and my father's parents, who were very class conscious, considered it all quite beneath them. As an example of this, when my father, at the age of 14, wanted to join the Hitler Youth, because they did fun things like teach you how to ride a motorbike and fly a glider, his parents wouldn't let him. My father never did join the Nazi party, even as a Luftwaffe pilot, holding a kind of lofty disdain for the ranters and ravers in power.

Nevertheless, there's that picture of my father's confirmation, with the swastika flag proudly on display. And having been raised as I was on the stories of the horrors of the war and the dangers of fanaticism, that little picture always gave me chills. A swastika just doesn't belong in church. Sadly, many of the German churches in the 30s were enthusiastic supporters of the Nazi party, who worked very hard to get the churches on-side, linking Christian faith with "my country right or wrong" patriotism, a propaganda and pressure campaign which led much of the German church into disgraceful support of the Nazi regime. Dissenting pastors were often removed from their positions, exiled, imprisoned, or, most famously in the case of pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed. It was not, in any way, an easy time.

All of which to say, flags in church have always made me nervous. Even the National Anthem in church makes me nervous. Not that I don't love Canada! I am deeply grateful to Canada for allowing my parents to immigrate in the early 1950s. They became proud Canadian citizens shortly thereafter, and I am proud to say that I was born in Canada to Canadian parents, and have happily lived my life in this wonderful country. My brother, who served in the Canadian Armed Forces and Canadian Federal Government, my sister as a medical researcher and educator and myself in my own public role have all sought in our small way to repay this country for its generosity. I am proud that my children are Canadian. The fact that I married an American girl was entirely by accident, and not by political intent. She's a Canadian citizen now as well.

You and I are, for the most part, citizens of Canada. And we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. And we must remember, as many in the German church forgot, that while we are called to be good and productive citizens of our country, our ultimate allegiance is to our heavenly King. Our primary and absolute allegiance is to Jesus Christ. As we read in the Scriptures earlier, *“our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”* As Christians, as citizens of Heaven, even though we are of a specific nationality, we do not separate ourselves according to racial, cultural, economic or national divides. Again from earlier: *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

The same Bible who calls us citizens of heaven recognises that we are earthly citizens too; we are in fact called to be model citizens. Peter, living among the Christians in Rome, the very centre of the power of the most powerful State of all time, put it this way (1 Peter 2:11-17 CEV):

Dear friends, you are foreigners and strangers on this earth. I beg you not to surrender to those desires that fight against you... The Lord wants you to obey all human authorities, especially the Emperor, who rules over everyone. You must also obey governors, because they are sent by the Emperor to punish criminals and to praise good citizens... You are free, but still you are God’s servants, and you must not use your freedom as an excuse for doing wrong. Respect everyone and show special love for God’s people. Honour God and respect the Emperor.

So we, like the Christians in long-ago Rome, are in this tension between obeying God and obeying the earthly authorities. Thankfully, in Canada, this is not always much of a tension. But in other lands it is. Even in our own land, at times, and increasingly so, there are laws passed and standards set which are not in harmony with the Gospel. What then do we do?

In the 1930s, a branch of the German church was confronted with this very dilemma. Those in opposition to the ideals and practises of the Nazi party formed what came to be known as the Confessing Church; producing a document, the Barmen Declaration, which outlined the Church’s responsibility regarding the State. This was modified and adopted by the Presbyterian Church in Canada as the “Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation,” which has been part of our Standards of Belief since 1955. In essence it says:

Christians, loyal to Jesus Christ, are called also to be good, productive, obedient citizens of the State. For its part, the State is called to provide for peace and justice for the citizens in its land. Christians, as good citizens, are called to help the State in this regard, and to call the State to account when it fails in its responsibilities. A State which rejects these responsibilities, or devolves to tyranny, ceases to be a legitimate State, and ceases to have a claim on the obedience of its people, or on the claim of Christians, whose ultimate authority is the person of Jesus Christ as revealed through the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments.

As Christians, we to lead by example. As citizens of Canada and children of our Heavenly King, we should lead the way in demonstrating acts of love, compassion, charity, and equality. We are called to participate in our political processes, prophetically bringing to our government's attention their responsibility to provide for peace and justice to all people, to ensure that the laws of our land are equitable and fair, and applied equally to all. We show gratitude and obedience to God through our gratitude and obedience to our levels of government, and we show our citizenship in the Kingdom of God through calling our governments to Godly standards. Our citizenship is truly a dual citizenship; but our highest allegiance, indeed our very lives, belong to God.

As Christians, and as citizens of Canada, it is right and proper for us to give thanks to God for the gift of this wonderful country. Pray that God would keep our land glorious and free. Stand on guard for the rights and freedoms, shoulder the obligations and responsibilities inherent in your citizenship. Participate with our government in providing for peace and justice, compassion and equality; in humility, demand of our representatives commitments to good, honest oversight of our communities, provinces and country, with protection for the vulnerable, hope for the young, jobs for the working, care for the ailing, and security for the aged. Together, let us maintain Canada as a beacon for the world, as an example to nations struggling under tyranny, and as a model to those nations seeking a new and a better way.

And, I'm sorry to say, pay your taxes. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But remember, too, to give to God what belongs to God, in whose image we are made, by whose grace we have been saved, in whose love we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.