

“The Things that are God’s”
Good Shepherd, Burke
Sermon for Proper 24, Year A
October 22, 2017
The Rev. Leslie E. Chadwick

Exodus 33:12-23 Psalm 99 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Matthew 22: 15-22

Leslie: “What have the Romans ever done for us?” This line comes from a comic skit in Monty Python’s film *The Life of Brian*. The setting is 1st century Jerusalem. The scene opens on a group of agitators in a house; a leader rallies his activists to form a plot against Pilate to dismantle the Roman Imperialist State. The Romans have taken everything the people had. The leader demands, “And what have they ever given us?”

Someone pipes up,

LEM #1: “The aqueduct.”

LEM #2: “Sanitation?!”

Leslie: “All right, I’ll grant you that the aqueduct and the sanitation are two things that the Romans have done.”

Christine: “Roads”

Leslie: “Well *yes obviously* the roads...the roads go without saying. But apart from the aqueduct, the sanitation, and the roads...”

[LEMs and Christine call out quickly]

LEM#1: Medicine

LEM#2: Education

Christine: Public Health

Leslie: “All right...all right...fair enough...but apart from better sanitation, and medicine, and education, and irrigation, and public health and roads and a freshwater system and baths and public order...what *have* the Romans done for us?”

LEM #1: “Brought Peace?”

Leslie: “Peace? Right. I give up!”

The meeting is obviously over at that point and so is the skit. Thank you!

Empires come with advantages. People at the bottom do bear economic burdens. Taxes have been hated since the dawn of time. The poor in first century Jerusalem were crushed by annual taxes on their harvests and personal property. But that was a byproduct of a system that had other benefits. If you were enterprising, you could make the Roman system work to your advantage. A tax collector could collect more than was required and keep the profit. A local king like Herod could keep peace under a Roman governor and get rich. A Pharisee, keeping to his own religious realm, could enjoy power and respect as an expert and enforcer of Jewish law.

It's the same in our system today. People can work things to their advantage. A few years ago, the comedian John Oliver asked a top aide to Senator Harry Reid, "what makes a politician successful?" The aide replied without hesitating, "Getting reelected." What first popped into his mind was not "getting legislation passed to ease people's burdens." It was keeping advantage. Two main questions lately seem to be: "What has the government done for us?" "What has the world done for us?" Regardless of your political leaning, the news is filled with ways others take advantage of us. Hackers of Equifax; big banks; other countries; groups not like us.

The kingdom of this world is an uncertain and insecure place. Things shift daily. We spend considerable time and energy to make the most of the advantages we have. We freeze our credit reports; ponder where to invest, how to secure the best education for our children; how to get what we need in retirement. Those activities are not bad in and of themselves, but taken to an extreme, they block our view of a different kingdom.

Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, is laser-focused on the kingdom of heaven. He is not an activist against Rome; he is not plotting a violent overthrow Herod or the Pharisees. He has no high earthly position to defend. No office for which to be reelected. He is uncompromisingly focused on delivering this good news: "The kingdom of heaven has come near! Repent and come in!"

Jesus is neither surprised nor deterred when the kings of this world act erratically or with cruelty. He was born into a world in which Herod the Great killed all children age 2 and under. Herod's son, Herod Antipas, beheaded John the Baptist to save face on a foolish blank-check promise. It's not that Jesus is indifferent to the rulers of the world. He withdraws by himself in grief at the news of John's death, but he is soon drawn out by his compassion for a hungry crowd. He keeps on preaching and living the kingdom message. Jesus patrols the periphery, heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, and hope to the poor; he eats with sinners and prostitutes; he accepts Matthew, a tax collector, who gives up taking advantage of others to follow Jesus.

In today's gospel, we see the Pharisees spend extraordinary time and energy to secure their advantage in an uncertain world. They plot to entrap Jesus. They gather their own disciples and others who are pro-Herod and send them to Jesus with a sickeningly sweet message, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the ways of God... Tell us then what you think: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Jesus smacks down their smug "gotcha" question. He withstood the temptation of Satan to throw himself down and see if angels would catch him; now he orders these hypocrites, "Stop putting me to the test." Jesus sees with laser clarity what is in their hearts. They fear losing what they have. They are angry that Jesus shows them no deference or partiality. They are outraged that Jesus does not recognize their place in the current order of things. They want to be rid of him.

But their trap does not work. Jesus says impatiently, "Show me the coin." He asks, "Whose image is on it?" They say, "Caesar's." He retorts, "Give then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

The silence that follows before they walk away is deafening. The zinger, “Give to God the things that are God’s” rings in the air. Their focus on plotting and entrapping to keep what they have undercuts the central reality they claim to profess: “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee.” God is the maker of heaven and earth. God is the maker of our hearts. As our clergy retreat leader at Shrine Mont this week put it, “God’s the maker of our hardware and software; He has proprietary access to our inner workings-to Him all desires are known and from Him no secrets are hid.” Jesus’ answer puts things back in their proper order. Without inciting rebellion, he “names and limits that which is due the emperor.” Everything we have, indeed everything in heaven and earth, belongs to God. And the Pharisees have forgotten that.

It’s easy to pile on the Pharisees and think, “How could you forget something so basic?” Your whole life is a gift. And you are sitting around nickeling and diming God, wasting time over a coin when Jesus has work to do. Yet, I see myself in these Pharisees. I am someone who does pretty well under the current system. I am white. I am a citizen. I have a job. My children have food, clothes, a house, two parents, indulgent aunts, uncles, and grandparents; access to education and medicine; and all the advantages of our society’s infrastructure. Yet I spend incredible energy trying to figure out how to spend “my” time, “my” money, and how to make the most of “my” choices to shape “my” future. I picture Jesus, knowing full well that there is no conscious malice in my preoccupation, growing impatient with me for putting God to the test.

There is work to be done to usher in God’s kingdom He’s brought near. Jesus longs to restore our focus on that. He sees us distracted by the actions, posturing, and tweets of the kings of this world. Our question “What has the *world* done for us?” eclipses the main event: what *Jesus* did for us and the whole world. He died to make known the Creator’s love for his creation. And he died so that we could live, giving all things back to God and bringing the joy of God’s kingdom to others.

At Shrine Mont this week, I walked down to the lake, and gazed up at the stars. I held up my hand to block a street lamp from my peripheral vision; suddenly I could see Cassiopeia, the 7 Sisters; the Bull; the Milky Way; even a shooting star; I felt as if the kingdom of heaven had come near; I could see with clarity in the cold mountain night air what I cannot see in the light pollution at home: a glimpse of the universe that belongs to the maker of heaven and earth.

As we consider what it means to be stewards this season, may we spend less time and energy poring over how to increase our advantages in this world. May we hold up a hand to the distractions, noises, and bright lights that keep us from seeing that the kingdom of heaven is near. May we feed the hungry, heal the sick, and give hope to the poor. Our question as followers of Jesus is not “What can the world do for us?” but “What can we do for God’s kingdom?”

Amen.