

Proper 24 Year A 2020

We are in the Temple precincts - the Pharisees and religious authorities are struggling to respond to Jesus. They ask him where his authority comes from and he replies - tell me about John the Baptist! Then there is a series of parables which all show (if you read them as I would probably read them) - they would show that the Pharisees are not as in tune with the will of God as they think they are - indeed, as in last Sunday's reading, they are not even willing to accept God's invitation to his Great Feast. They have their noses inside the book of rules, so fail to see God, or his children.

Jesus is very good at not answering questions, especially when the question is asked to lead him into a trap - today's reading is a good example of that. Frequently he will answer a question with another question. Today we have 'whose image is that?' The Roman coins used to pay the annual tax demanded of every adult man in Palestine added theological insult to political and financial injury; they bore a human image, offensive in itself to the Jews and doubly so when the inscription around the edge declared that the man whose image was there was the son of god and himself divine.

But Jesus isn't to be trapped into starting a tax revolt against the Romans by saying the people should not pay the tax - an answer bound to upset the supporters of Herod, who relied upon the Romans for his

authority; nor would he be trapped into denying the ultimate authority of God, and thus annoying the Pharisees, who were out to trap him,. The answer Jesus gives to this connived question - and were there ever stranger bed fellows than the Pharisees and the Herodians? - but the answer they get is certainly not the one they expected. It was the answer to a different question.

Jesus is in fact saying give the dirty stuff back to Caesar, who deserves it. Caesar's absolute claims are as nothing before the all-embracing claim of the one true God. Jesus, himself the divine Image, is about to pay the ultimate price in self-giving love, and it is the proclamation of that act, of that love, which inspired the early church, as Paul puts it in this his first letter - 'to the work of faith, and the labour of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'. This short Gospel reading is difficult to unravel - what does it mean for us today, in 21st century Europe - it certainly cannot mean the same as it did in first century Palestine under Roman occupation. Let's try this. Is it speaking to us about putting bits of our lives in separate Pidgeon holes - work/leisure, sacred/profane, secular/spiritual? if we give to God the things which are God's, doesn't that surely mean everything - including how we earn our money, how we spend our money, our support for or opposition to the way our taxes are spent, how we treat other people (or old friend 'us and them'), our care of creation. All that we do and how we do it is a reflexion of our love of God, our

gratitude to God for grace, mercy and for Jesus, an expression of our faith.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica he found a port city in the northern Aegean Sea, the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia, with about 300,000 inhabitants. It was devoted to the Imperial cult of Rome - worshipping the Emperor as a god - but culturally it remained Greek. It was governed by Greek law and was commercially a very prosperous place (for some, anyway) being on a major trade route. Thessalonica numbered amongst its inhabitants a sizeable Jewish colony which had a synagogue. You can read about St Paul's encounters with the Jews of Thessalonica in the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 17). It wasn't very encouraging, and Paul had to make a hasty exit, leaving the city and making his way south to Athens. But we are told that, in spite of fierce Jewish opposition to his message, he did convert some Jews, and 'a great many God-fearing people, and Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women'.

So, in spite of strong opposition from many of the Jews, a church was founded. From Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out what was happening there. Timothy reported back with the good news of their faith and love. It was in response to this news that Paul wrote his letter - probably about 50 or 51 AD or perhaps even a little earlier- the very earliest Christian writing we know about. This letter was followed by several more to the churches Paul had founded,

responding to queries, and addressing the worries and difficulties of church members. With these things - worries, queries, and difficulties - he ranged widely over the vital issues of Christian theology, faith and life, discussing often very local issues, things that mattered specifically to those congregations at that time, in the light of his basic principles. We saw that last week when he urged the church in Philippi to help two women who were clearly in disagreement.

Paul's letters also provide a fascinating portrait of the man himself, sometimes affectionate, sometimes angry, often frustrated, but always working passionately and selflessly for his Lord - our Lord - and for the churches he loved. But we must always remember that St Paul is not God, and that we are not obliged always to agree with everything he says. He is a man of his time and of his culture.

If you read the letters in chronological order rather than as they are printed (the longest first, the shortest last) you can see how, over the years, his understanding of various theological issues developed and changed - and Thessalonians 1 and 2 give us a good example of this.

The first letter is pastoral, warm in tone and affectionate throughout. Its main topic is the immanence of the second coming of Christ, and of the last judgement. Paul's understanding of this changed in time and he had to write to them again to stress that the time was not yet ripe - and we still wait.

To pagan ears, Paul's preaching of Jesus Christ would have sounded very Jewish. There is only one God, the Creator - man-made idols are lies and delusions. The true God is alive and life-giving; idols, lifeless themselves, cannot give life. But Paul went further than these basic Jewish principles. Ever since the Exodus, Jews had believed that you could not see God face to face, and live. Paul preached that man-kind had seen God; he had been made known to them personally in and as Jesus of Nazareth. He was what all Jews were waiting for - the Messiah - but, as Jesus had predicted in the parable we heard last Sunday, they had declined the invitation to come to the wedding feast. Those in Thessalonica who believed, those 'god-fearing people, the Greeks and the leading women', became, in imitation of Jesus, God imitators, Christ imitators, Paul imitators. It is hard for us to understand that before Paul arrived, no-one had thought about living an ethical life. But Paul had modelled before them a Christian ethic - 'you know' he writes 'what kind of persons we proved to be among you, for your sake'. And now, to his delight, they were themselves modelling this Christian ethic before the world.

Nowadays, we keep telling ourselves that God is present throughout the world in all places and at all times, but we need to hear Paul - and the Thessalonians - telling us that the way we live should be distinctive - and sometimes even shocking to others, and Paul says that the Thessalonians new and very distinctive life style was the result of the

work of the Holy Spirit amongst them, through the proclamation of Jesus as the risen one, the coming judge, and the deliverer. 'Wait' Paul writes 'for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming'.

All this was so unexpected and crazy sounding that Paul had to recognise that their new-found faith, hope and love could only be the result of God's work through the Holy Spirit. The Christians of Thessalonica had been marked out as a people who worshipped and waited for the true Son of the true God - in a world where Caesar demanded both worship as divine son of his divine predecessor and also political and economic fidelity.

Today the world has other gods to worship - money, power, influence, self - the things which belong to Caesar - give them back to him. Like the Thessalonians, we need to work at faith, hope and love, and, as Paul assures them, and us, in this work God is active, empowering, encouraging and persistent - definitely persistent. God doesn't give up on us, and neither should we give up on God, or on each other.