

## 16 October 2011, Trinity 17, Proper 24

Exodus 33:12-23: You shall see my back but not my face  
Psalm 99: The Lord is king  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10: comforting Thess  
Matthew 22:15-22: Render to Caesar ...

Read it again 'UriahHeep-ishly'

If I thought that today's Gospel was a call to pay taxes unquestioningly, then I would quitting the church without delay. There must be, there has to be, another way of looking at this.

The Gospel passage occurs as part of an exchange between Jesus, the pedantic Pharisees, and Herod's yes-men—the jobsworths and the secret police—who are all trying to find an excuse to report him to the authorities. If Jesus had said 'pay taxes' the Pharisees would have reported him for being disloyal to the Jewish cause. If he'd said 'don't pay' the Romans would have him by the short and curlies for speaking against the Emperor. A no-win situation.

But Jesus is far from stupid. He uses his nous.

The message to give to Caesar what is Caesar's is itself controversial. Imagine you are one of Jesus' listeners. You are in a land you call your own, but one that has been conquered time and again, by Xerxes and Cyrus from Persia, by Alexander the Great, and now Augustus Caesar. All of them claimed to be Gods – divine – with their heads on the coinage. The Roman empire levied a tax that went overseas. The conquerors get paid for their oppression. Why should the Jews pay? Most of the listeners would have resented the Roman occupation, so quite likely felt that nothing rightly belonged to Caesar, and would not be prepared to give anything. And anyway, any loyal Jew—which Jesus was—knew fine well that the earth is the Lord's and all that therein is (Psalm 24). Everything belongs to the Lord.

This is an interesting passage at this time for us. How do I see this passage at a time when people's homes are being repossessed? How do I see this passage at a time when parishioners tell me that their incomes have been shattered? How do we interpret this passage at a time when we see our taxes used to maintain the exorbitant incomes of godless fools who got us into this mess?

Maybe the first message is that we need to be wily as foxes in the pursuit of truth—to stand up to those who oppose us, and not to give in. And that in itself is a good enough message. But maybe there's another message too. It was Caesars' head on the coin—pay to the image what is his. But, my friends, it is the divine image that is in every one of us. It is the divine image that we see when we look into our hearts. We are made in God's image, and—in a kind of exchange—in order to give ourselves to the divine image within us, we need to let it fill us from inside by giving to the world what only we can give, by being ourselves, our gloriously human, true selves, by letting the divine within come out of us and work with the world. If we become the person God intended us to be, we will set the world alight.

Jesus' Jerusalem was in a time of crisis. Economic pundits tell us now is a time of crisis. Crisis in Greek means decision, judgment, opportunity for change. In Hebrew, it means rebirth, in the sense of something new rising from the ruins of the old. Let's hope that we can allow our real selves to break through all the rubbish that we surround ourselves with—possessions, attitudes, the tunnel vision of consumerism. It's interesting that the notion of salvation can be interpreted in Hebrew theology as emerging into a wide place, wide views, seeing clearly in all directions—like the views round here, all options open, unlimited. Liberation from limitation. Let's use this time of economic uncertainty to accept that we can not predict the future, that there's no point retreating into prisons of our own making, there's no point surrounding ourselves with possessions that will vanish tomorrow.

How might we do this?

As individuals

See things anew. Throw off the chains of hurts from our youth that we carry around with us. Forgive the past. Then we will be open to the divine spirit, and there's some chance that we will be able to render to God what's God's—that is, to be ourselves, and to allow ourselves to live life to the full, giving to the world what only we can give.

Maybe like me, you feel unworthy. Well, throughout the Bible we have stories of the most unworthy people being used to do the Lord's work: Abraham, Joseph, Jonah, David, to name four. The Thessalonians in today's Epistle were a pretty unlikely bunch—licentious, persecuted, worried about their mates that had died. Paul reassures them that all will be well. And likewise, we mustn't let ourselves be distracted by our own twitteriness and unworthiness.

As community

We also, as the C of I community, need to give ourselves to the community, to go out and say with confidence 'here we are'. Find out what the community needs, and help do it. For many reasons over the decades, the C of I community has kept itself to itself. Now, it has a great chance to be what has recently been described (Patsy McGarry) as 'the acceptable face of Christianity in Ireland'. Open our churches during the day. Invite people to use the building for concerts. Open ourselves up to the community. Join in rather than keep apart. Another exchange—by giving we receive/.

This time of crisis is a time for facing life's uncertainty full in the face, wholeheartedly, so that we can render to God what is God's.