



Highfield Rd
Uniting Church

Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church October 19, 2014

Matthew 22: 15-22

A few months ago, Ministers and leaders from a number of denominations got together to protest about the treatment of Asylum Seekers in detention, particularly children. They formed a group called "Love Makes a Way", and began a series of peaceful sit-ins in the offices of Federal Parliamentarians. These took the form of prayer vigils and, despite the peaceful nature – no shouting or speeches or marches, in every case the demonstrators have been arrested by police and facing court, the total is now 81 Christian Ministers and leaders. The most recent sit in was in Geelong last weekend, in the office of the Shadow Immigration Minister. This is civil disobedience, democracy in action, but because it involves Christian leaders, it is also a religious issue. To whom do we owe allegiance? Political and civil authorities demanding order and border control, or God who calls for mercy and compassion, even for the alien among us? The same issue that is at the heart of today's Gospel; to whom does Israel - and by extension the church – owe allegiance?

This section of Matthew's Gospel is all about controversy and challenge; Jesus is not just a popular country preacher, his message, his actions and his influence have national implications. The Pharisee's position as the religious leaders is threatened by this man; worship in the Temple is very well, but only through strict obedience to the Law can the nation be right with God, and this Jesus keeps breaking the Law and forgiving people who have broken the Law! The Herodian's position is threatened as well; having a unique temple for religious festivals is all very well, but the only path to peace and prosperity is through obedience to the Roman occupation, and this Jesus keeps talking about a kingdom and gathering excited mobs of people! After Jesus staged that impressive entry into Jerusalem and then violently expelled the money changers from the Temple, it is natural that these religious and civic leaders should come to him and ask, "What is your authority?" In parables like the vineyard from 2 weeks ago and last week's wedding feast, he unfolds God's authority and claim on allegiance and a condemnation of their leadership. And those leaders fight back against Jesus, not with justification of their position and theological standing, but with tricks and traps to try to weaken Jesus popularity and reputation. With this interesting, but rather bizarre, blending of religion and politics, these two groups that would normally be mortal enemies – Pharisees and

Herodians – try to entice Jesus to take sides in their fight over the allegiance of the people. The Law of Moses or the Roman Empire.

Before we get to Jesus answer, we need to see the depth and the intensity of this fight for allegiance. This is not a fresh issue caused by a bad governor like Pilate, this is a 1000 year old question. As soon as the issue of ‘who owns the land’ was resolved, or seemingly resolved, the leaders of Israel come to Samuel and ask for a king. “Who owns the land’ morphs into ‘who owns Israel?’ Yes, they were God’s people, but they didn’t want to be under God’s rule because God was mysterious and invisible. They wanted to be like the other nations and have a physical person to lead them, they wanted to give their allegiance to someone who was physical, present and like them. And while they said “We’ll still be God’s people, God should appoint us a king”, the history shows that following a king meant deserting God. And while the disaster of the Exile had all the marks of being a chance for a fresh start, the reality was that they still saw only the physical and so while the people cried when Ezra read the Law, they never really put it into practice. Their first act in Ezra is to expel all the foreign wives and children, thinking that God wanted racial purity as the sign of holiness, an action that was totally against the Law of love for neighbour! And so the Persian Occupation became the Greek Occupation which became the Roman Occupation, in effect the Exile continued with the only response being military resistance, the Maccabees and then the Zealots. That was Jesus point with the parable of the vineyard, the people and particularly the leaders never got the point of the Law. You could be God’s people no matter who the political leader or overlord was, the Law called you to justice, mercy, compassion, faith and love.

And so, to Jesus answer to this trick question; a question very like “when did you stop beating your wife?” The Pharisees understood that the parable of the vineyard was spoken against them but that didn’t make them stop and think, here they are, straight away, with a test for Jesus that is about this same age old issue – to whom do you owe your allegiance? Rather than the expected yes or no answer, Jesus answer is the same message that God has been sending to the people for all those 1000 years – “that’s just a coin, give it to Caesar, but your allegiance is to God, give to God what is God’s; justice, mercy, compassion, faith and love”. Or, in more theological terms – “that’s just the image of a person, give that person what is his, but you were made in the image of God, give to God what is God’s – your whole person”. As controversial as this issue was for Jesus in Judea, by the time that Matthew is writing, this was a different, more controversial issue. In the harsh world of the Roman Empire, the early church grew and thrived with the strong statement that Jesus is Lord, a seditious statement in the face of the Empire that said Caesar is Lord. But that early church never strove to overthrow the Empire, rather they strove to live within it; carrying that seditious message that in effect said, “It doesn’t matter who is in power, work for the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus. Our allegiance is to God, live for the Gospel and the kingdom; justice, mercy, compassion, faith and love.

There will be conflict, but it will not be political, it will be ethical for our allegiance is to the God of faith, hope and love”.

This is still a living issue with the two extremes of this story being visible in our culture. The strict separation of church and state looks like the Herodians – religion is all well and good, but keep it over there in the private sphere, don't let it over here where it might frighten the politicians. And the strict Christian Empires of the Middle Ages, and the Islamic States of today, look a bit like the Pharisees – religion is about all of life, let us control everything by religious law. This little story preserved by Matthew and Luke takes a third way, our allegiance is to God and not to the political authorities, we may get involved in political discussion but from the point of view of being God's people, people of justice, mercy, compassion, faith and love.

Our faith is not to be confined to our personal life but lived in all our engagement with the world, recognising that the world is temporal and not dominant. Engaging in the political and material world is not a threat to our faith, but neither should our faith be a threat to the political and material world. The market may claim to be the dominant power in our culture, but we know it is just a human construct; we can deal in the market, but our allegiance is to God and we follow the call to justice, mercy, compassion, faith and love. Deliver to the world only what belongs to the world, but deliver to God what belongs to God. Amen.