

## OWED TO GOD

OCTOBER 19, 2008

Last Sunday was the great feast day celebration of Thanksgiving, that wonderful time when we celebrate the harvest and meet as family groups to give thanks for family and friends. It was a glorious weekend with clear skies, fall breezes and trees coloured by the paintbrush of God. Numerous children were a part of our services as we celebrated God's rich bounty from the ages of a few weeks to close to a hundred years.

Giving thanks on that weekend was very easy and did not need a reminder to ourselves that we need to take note of God's goodness to us here in the County and nearby.

So, here we are, a week later and the smell of cooking turkey has passed. Our country has just survived another federal election and in the true Canadian style no one appears to be fully satisfied by the results regardless of the parties involved. In an era where people across the globe are struggling to taste democracy and have a say in how their country is run, just slightly over 50% of eligible Canadians bothered to cast their vote. If there is one phrase we are tired of hearing it is the lame excuse that my vote makes no difference anyway!

God calls on all his creation to stand up and take their responsibilities seriously. We are in the world and we must be also of the world for we can not separate ourselves from what is happening around us. We can influence only by being active and involved even if what we wanted to happen does not always materialize.

In our reading from the Gospel According to Matthew this morning, the religious leaders around Jesus tried once again to trip him up. We will give him a winless proposition and then see if we can not entrap him to say something we could take as a serious offense to the governmental authorities. Maybe that will stop this man named Jesus and shut him up once and for all!

So a trick question is posed to Jesus. First however, they try to butter him up and make him relax so he might say things casually which may entrap him. They waited until there were crowds around to be witnesses to what Jesus would say. So they begin: "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. So, tell us then what you think about the following.." These words were clear lies as they felt no such warm respectful thoughts about Jesus. To them he was a dangerous fraud leading people into wrong thoughts as it related to the ancient faith. They were however correct in regard to how Jesus treated all people. Persons of rank were not held in any higher esteem and awe than the honest seeker at any level of society.

So the question is asked: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Let's remember that the Jews in this area were subjects of the Roman Empire and were expected to be loyal by the Roman authorities. A bit of background information here about taxes.

The Roman government exacted three regular taxes. First, the ground tax where a man had to pay one tenth of his grain and one fifth of the oil and wine he produced to the government. Second, the income tax which was then one percent of a man's income. The third tax was a poll tax, a tax which had to be paid by every male person from age fourteen to sixty-five and by every female person from the ages of twelve to sixty-five. It amounted to one denarius, about a day's pay for a man. This coin for this last tax was commonly called a tribute coin.

This poll tax was the one the Jews most hated as it was to be a tribute to an emperor they despised as a conqueror. More than that, they felt offended to pay this as a faithful Jew who believed that God was the only king. To pay this tax to an earthly king or emperor was to admit the validity of his kingship and thereby to insult Almighty God! In short, it put them into a dilemma of conscience.

We need to remember that Matthew was writing his Gospel between 80 and 90AD. The great temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70AD. After this destruction the Romans demanded the Jews still pay the poll tax to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. So this issue of the tax festered for generations in Palestine.

Back to Jesus and the men trying to trap him; Jesus, ever wise, asked them for a denarius which was stamped with the emperor's head. In those days, coinage was the sign of kingship. As soon as there was a new king or emperor, he struck new coins with his head on the coin and put them quickly into usage. The coins were deemed to be the property of the king whose image it bore.

Jesus asked them this question: whose image is on the coin? The answer of course was that the Caesar's head was on it. "Well then," said Jesus, "give it back to Caesar; it is his. Give to Caesar what belongs to him; and give to God what belongs to him."

One of the unique things about Jesus was that he never laid down rules and regulations; this is why his teachings are timeless and never go out of date. Jesus rather laid down principles and this principle in the story is very important.

Every Christian man and woman has a double citizenship. First, he or she is a citizen of whatever country in which they happen to live. To that country he or she owes many things. They owe the safety against lawlessness only a settled government can give; they owe much to public services. These services of public health, public education and welfare are to name but a few. So we are under a debt of obligation and thus as Christians should not separate ourselves from society. Because the Christian is a man or woman of honour, he or she must be a responsible citizen. In other words, failure in good citizenship is also a failure in Christian duty. The Christian therefore has a responsibility and duty towards Caesar in return for the privileges which the rule of Caesar brings to them.

But the Christian is also a citizen of heaven. There are matters of religion and of principle in which the responsibility of the Christian is to God. Most of the time, the two loyalties

need not clash. However, when the Christian is convinced that it is God's will that something should be done, it must be done; or if he is convinced that something is against God's will, he must resist and take no part in it. The boundary between the two is a matter of conscience. We are to be at one and the same time a good citizen of our country and a good citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2: 17 said about all this these words "Honour all men; love the brotherhood; fear God, honour the Emperor." Let us remind ourselves again the meaning of these words to Peter. This might be called a summary of a Christian's duty.

Honour all men. These words were so significant to his age. Rome had as many as 60,000,000 slaves across its empire. Slaves were not considered persons by law. They had no rights whatsoever. Peter is saying to Christians to remember the rights of human personality and the dignity of every man. People are never things. Within the Christian family, all people, slaves and masters, were equal before God. Others are not there solely for our convenience.

Love the brotherhood. Within the Christian community, this respect for every man and woman turns to something much more; it turns to love. Love must always be the dominant atmosphere of the Church. The Church is the larger family of God and its bond must be love.

Fear God. Fear here does not mean terror; it means awe and reverence and respect. We will never reverence or respect one another if we do not first reverence and respect God. It really is only when God is given his rightful place in the centre that all other things take their proper place.

Honour the king or emperor. This is an amazing line, particularly when you think that the author of 1 Peter was writing in the time of Emperor Nero. The authority has been set up to preserve order among men and that it must be respected in the issues of enabling society to function.

Peter in this passage tells us to honour all men; love the brotherhood; fear God; honour the king. In short, if we are to truly love God in reverence and praise, we have to be in right relationship with our fellow man and women inside and outside of the community of faith.

Paul in his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, starts his letter with the words "Grace to you and peace." Paul was the great scholar who was a Hebrew scriptures specialist as well as the well versed scholar in Greek thought and literature. He brought from his Hebrew roots the familiar word of greeting - Shalom or peace. From his experience in Greek thought and his own conversion experience to Christianity, he brought the word grace, that wonderful gift of God, salvation, so freely given through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son.

So Paul's greeting here is the joining of these two key parts of who he now is and his own experience of faith in God. "Grace to you and peace."

Paul takes great pleasure in the Thessalonian church and he speaks of his gratitude for the creative things he sees in the members of this congregation. He lists the virtues he sees at work there and holds them up as examples for other Christians to emulate.

These are the words he holds up: faith, love, enduring helpfulness, high Christian character, evangelical zeal and personal friendship. These are key characteristics Paul believes Christians need to exhibit as their response to a bounteous and loving God.

Faith: deep faith in God which evokes a thankful follower, liberated, forgiven, committed to a life for and with God. A person of faith knows that it is not what we do that counts, but what God does that counts.

Love that is boundless, encompassing the lovely and the unlovely, the likeable and the unlikeable; love that transcends rank, wealth, colour and culture; love which is expressed in the fellowship of believers and in the world where love is virtually unknown.

Enduring helpfulness is faith in action in response to the overwhelming actions of God.

Evangelical zeal is our need to tell others of the saving actions of Christ because we can do no other. We can not contain the faith bubbling out of us as we respond to the loving and forgiving actions of God.

Personal friendship, those bonds we form between people of faith in the Christian community known as the church. These bonds support us, stretch us, teach us and free us to be the people God created us to be.

We owe so much to our beloved God.

The key thing to remember here, is though we owe everything to our Creator and loving God, there is no force sent from God to force us into bowing before him. The only force is the outpouring of love, patience, concern and forgiveness which are the trademarks of God. Clearly God remains hopeful that his love will generate a warm and sincere response of praise and thanksgiving from us. Do we owe God anything? Of course, we owe him our very life and all we are and have in response to his never ending love and commitment to us personally and in our community of faith.

Jesus confounded those who were out to trick him when he told them to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God. Our question to ourselves should be: how am I doing with giving to God what belongs to God? This is the question and only each of us privately in his or her heart can answer this for themselves.

Thanks be to God!

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