

Ordinary Sunday 29 A White Ribbon Sunday Ex 33:12-33 1 Thess 1:1-10 Matt 22:15-22

It took some time, but it happened. After a few weeks of moaning, groaning, and pontificating, it happened. We have our new government and a new electoral term is underway. It was quite a process. Both the political maneuvering and the media and public scrutiny and commenting that went along with it. And all of us were affected. We voted. We waited. Some of us will be pleased, some of will not be. But as Christians in NZ, we have been involved in this process, and as Christians we are involved with what happens in our world, big or small. Major or minor. And for us here in NZ, this is major.

As Christians we are involved in, and with the state.

Our gospel text helps us with that involvement. The gospel writer skillfully tells us that the state has a positive role to play in the lives of human beings, “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and God what is God’s.”

Many may find that, an usual statement because you have always thought this was self-evident, but that is not always the case. I couldn’t count the number of times I have heard it said that the “world” is against God, that we must be suspicious of the state as it is a godless notion! Jesus says here that that is not true. In fact, quite the opposite, that the state is a positive, in the lives of human society.

How many of us could afford to lay down our own roads, build our own hospitals, construct our own schools, pay our own superannuation or unemployment benefits? How many of us could provide for ourselves the benefits that being a citizen confers?

Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s!

These negative ideas about statehood were obvious to me when I was a prison chaplain, dealing with Christian volunteers; some felt that the prison system was anti Christian, anti God and simply punitive. All these guys needed was a listening ear and some love and everything would be ok.

Now, there are always things that can be improved, but the root of their criticism wasn’t the prison system but a false understanding of how to apply the gospel to real life.

One of the great advantages of living down the historical process is there is nothing new under the sun. During the reformation, there was a lot of thinking done about the place of the state, the church, the family, and the person in relation to this gospel story of Jesus.

One of the great reformers Martin Luther, following on from this text, said that the Christian person inhabits two kingdoms, the kingdom of society and the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of society things may not work out quite the same as they might in the Kingdom of God or

personally. And a, good example of this issue is forgiveness. Martin Luther said what you might put up with personally as a Christian, could not always be countenanced in the family or state.

For instance, if someone robs and beats you, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, you are certainly free to forgive that person, but, you are not free to give that person permission to commit that act again. Especially to someone else.

So, if you are beaten and robbed, you may feel that forgiveness of those actions is the best policy, and it very well may be. But that doesn't mean that that person who commits that act goes unpunished, able to do that to someone else. The re committing of that act, is an issue of justice, not forgiveness. Because if your forgiveness leads to an injustice against someone else, how is that good!

This is also true in families, where it may be parents or partners who are unjust, and as Christians we might be encouraged or cajoled to be forgiving, not to press charges and try and sort it our ourselves. This encouragement or cajoling might even come from a minister or priest.

But as has been suggested that while we can personally forgive, it is the collective, the state that decides about punishment, as forgiveness by us, is not permission to the person committing the act to feel free to do it again, either to us or to anyone else.

Forgiveness and justice are equally important in God's economy.

Which is why prisons or some form of state imposed restraint is necessary for the committing of crimes. And why our Christian Prison volunteers got it wrong.

Today we are remembering White Ribbon Sunday highlighting that domestic violence is an unacceptable part of our society, and understanding that that has not always been the case in church circles, but as we have seen from Martin Luther and our gospel text for today...that former position is and has always been fundamentally wrong.

Forgiveness and justice are equally important in God's economy.

Let us celebrate the gifts of statehood and give unto God all that God is due.

Let us remember we are citizens of two kingdoms with two sets of responsibilities and privileges....

Let us "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's!"

Amen.