



Sunday 29A

What did Jesus tell us about government?

18th October 2020

[Isaiah 45:1, 4-6, Matthew 22:15-21]

Today's readings are about the empires in our world. Isaiah mentions Cyrus, ruler of the mighty Persian empire around 2,500 years ago. In the gospel Jesus is challenged by officials who were part of the Roman empire. There have been many empires since Jesus' time, and today there are the empires of China and of the USA. The readings challenge us to think about how these empires touch **our** lives.

Isaiah was very blunt. He writes that God can bring good out of the Persian empire's terrible violence, conquest and enslavement. 'Though you do not know me [Cyrus], I arm you, that all people may know that apart from me, all is nothing.'

Empires are built by violence and sustained by violence. They conquer small countries and steal their resources, keeping the people poor. To varying degrees, they enslave people. In totalitarian China, while millions have been lifted out of poverty, the individual person can be totally controlled by the state, for the State claims to be greater than the individual.

In the USA's empire, which pretends to be democratic, a small class of wealthy people control finance and production, and wealth is poorly shared. Since 1945 that empire has invaded, or overthrown the governments of, more than 50 countries. It is sustained by war, for its biggest export industry is weapons. Every hour of the day, it has 400 *Minuteman* nuclear missiles ready to launch, which can destroy 13,600 times more cities and people than they destroyed in Hiroshima. Many other deadly missiles are being carried around in submarines. We don't know how many missiles China has.

We need government, but we do not need empires. Here, in the final chapters of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is heavily involved in the politics of empire. His strong parables warn the religious and political leaders that they are going to lose their power, because they are not using it to serve God in God's people. The Herodians – who supported king Herod and Rome - don't like Jesus' criticism. Nor do the priests. They both plot to destroy him. They flatter him with the highest praise, then say:

‘Tell us, should we support the empire by paying tax? Or not? Jesus commands them in turn: ‘Hypocrites! Show me a coin’. Whose image is this?’

Jesus skilfully avoids their ‘either-or’; he refuses to divide the world, as many politicians and journalists divide it, into two enemy camps, ‘us’ and ‘them’. Jesus has come to unite the human race, not divide us. But what does he mean, ‘Give to Caesar what is his... and to God what is God’s’. Does Jesus tell us to pay *nothing* to Caesar? That would be calling for rebellion; but Jesus is not violent. Does he say ‘the emperor is serving God, so pay Caesar *without question*?’ That would be to *join* the empire. No. He says: ‘Pay, but *question Caesar*, and *serve God*. He is showing us how to *resist* empire, to put Caesar into context, just as Isaiah does to Cyrus. Be faithful to God in this unfinished world. God will bring good out of Caesar’s many evils.

This is the same subversive advice as *turning the other cheek*, when a powerful person insults us; or offering to carry the soldier’s pack two miles, *putting him in the wrong*, because he can legally only demand one mile. And it is like shaming the person who unjustly sues you for your coat by giving him *all your clothes*.

As followers of Jesus we *must* challenge empire. Many people have to feed their family by working for empire in the department of defence, or the arms industry; or as a border force official, forced to treat some refugees unjustly. But they must *question* what they are being told to do... and agitate for improvement, for change, for justice.

Some of Jesus’ followers have protested with great courage. Dominican sister Ardeth Platte, who died recently, preached strongly against the USA’s nuclear madness that threatens to destroy us all. Back in 2000 she and two other Dominican sisters hammered on the silo housing a Minuteman nuclear missile.

They made a cross there with their own blood, and prayed while waiting to be arrested. They each served about three years in jail. Ardeth and her sisters were often in jail for other preaching actions. These were not useless gestures, for with others they got all nuclear weapons removed from their state of Michigan; and they formed the anti-nuclear organisation ICAN, which recently won the Nobel peace prize.

Like Jesus, Ardeth Platte’s courage challenges us to love and serve God in people, even as we obey, but critically question, the governments that rule us.

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