

The Gospel today causes us to think of the relationship between God and the state, between God and secular society, perhaps. *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's ...* but what exactly is Caesar's? And what is God's?

It is fairly easy to empty of any subtlety the distinction which Jesus makes. Some people interpret the saying of Jesus to mean that the Church and politics are separate spheres, have nothing to say to each other. In the minds of such people, religion is a purely private matter, no different from one's taste in food or music, let's say. So, they say, leave people free to worship as they wish, but do not allow religious principles influence in any way the decisions of public, political life.

The problem with this is that Jesus himself did not practise it. While he was not a revolutionary like the zealots, he did praise John the Baptist, whose incessant criticism of Herod precisely on moral grounds led to his martyrdom. There cannot be two consciences: a public and a private one.

On the other hand, there are those who would reject the principle entirely, and who would want to see the state run entirely on religious grounds. Such are the theocracies of some – not all – Islamic states, and such was the prevailing idea in Calvinist Geneva after the Reformation, for example. Catholics may be said to have dallied with that idea, too, with the Papal States, for example, though they arose more out of necessity, as the collapse of the Roman Empire left a power vacuum which only the pope could fill, rather than from any philosophical conviction.

A more complicated – but, I would suggest, a truer – way of looking at things is suggested by St Augustine. I am sure you have all heard of his little book the *Confessions*. I hope that many of you have read it. If not, I recommend it to you: a short book, readily available in English in paperback, and a very readable account of Augustine's conversion. But if you are already familiar with it, you might next turn your attention to a much bigger tome – also readily available – *The City of God*.

In the *City of God*, Augustine is confronting a situation not unlike our own. In the days of his youth, it seemed that all the world was becoming Christian. The

Emperor Constantine had ended the persecutions in 313, and Theodosius had declared Christianity the religion of the Empire in 380. Yet in 410 the Visigoths had sacked Rome, and continued – along with the Vandals, the Franks and others – to ravage the now-fractured empire.

It is not surprising that Christianity came under attack. The old gods had made Rome strong, people said: this Christian god of love had made her weak. Or perhaps the old gods were wreaking their revenge.

If you think of Australia one hundred years ago, and compare it with today, you see Christianity has gone from being the dominant way of thinking in the country, to being a minority opinion, and one under attack. At the same time, former Christian countries – or parts of countries, like parts of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq - are losing their character because of war, or simply because of the influx of massive numbers of refugees with a different faith and a different set of values to the countries they enter. The scale of the crisis is staggering. In recent years more than half a million Rohingya refugees fled Burma, at least 5.5 million people have fled Syria, 2.5 million Afghanistan, and 1.4 million South Sudan.

It was very much the same in Augustine's day. The Ostrogoths and Visigoths, for example, entered the Roman Empire not out of choice but because they were fleeing the Huns. The Ostrogoths seem to have been allowed in to what today we call Hungary; the Visigoths, refused entry, forced their way to the West, eventually ending up in Spain. Well, you get the picture.

And don't think that our own time is unique in having had many of the worst scandals caused by the Church's own members. Everyone has heard of the heroic acts of the martyrs during the persecution of Diocletian, but how many have heard of the Decian persecution a few years earlier? Not many, and there's a reason for that: a sense of shame among the early Church at the number of the lapsed, those who denied the Faith and even denounced their fellow Christians during that persecution. Then as now, some of the greatest weakness is within.

The City of God, says Augustine, is always at war with the City of this world. Where we may go wrong, says Augustine, is in confusing a particular kingdom of

this world with the Kingdom of God. Yes it was a good thing that the Emperor became a Christian, but it didn't make the Roman Empire the Kingdom of God, nor would its collapse be the end of the world – or of the Church!

Augustine tells the story of an encounter between the Macedonian Emperor, Alexander the Great, and a pirate.

... It was a witty and truthful rejoinder which was given by a captured pirate to Alexander the Great. The king asked the fellow, "What do you think you are doing, infesting the sea?" And the pirate answered, with uninhibited insolence, "The same as you, infesting the earth! But because I do it with a tiny boat, I'm called a pirate: because you have a mighty navy, you're called an emperor.

And so Augustine comments: "Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms?"

The City of God and the City of the Devil overlap and intermingle. God is active everywhere – even among our worst enemies. Just recently I came upon an interview with a man who was imprisoned as a Muslim terrorist for ten years in Pakistan. He had certainly killed people, and he dedicated himself to radicalising fellow prisoners. And yet, after some years in that place, he had a conversion himself – to Christianity. Not unlike Paul, who had assisted at the murder of Stephen. We never know where God is acting.

Because this is the case, Jesus does not urge refusing taxes even though one objects to the actions of those who were levying them. But neither does he allow us to ignore our primary duty which is to God: *render unto God the things that are God's*. That includes the duty to speak out against immorality and injustice, like the prophets and John the Baptist, even at cost to ourselves.

I would like to say more about Augustine, but time is slipping by. Instead, I would like to finish with a text from a century or so earlier, a fascinating text from the early third century called the *Letter to Diognetus*. It reflects similarly on the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives...

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world. As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wars against it, not because of any injury the soul has done it, but because of the restriction the soul places on its pleasures. Similarly, the world hates the Christians, not because they have done it any wrong, but because they are opposed to its enjoyments.

.... As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian's lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself.

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