Sermon for 29th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

i

Moses is very, very nervous. He has just experienced the best of times and the worst of times. He has been led to safety from Pharaoh’s clutches by means of the plagues of Egypt and has crossed the Red Sea and received the 10 Commandments, the holy foundation of the Jewish faith; he has conversed with God “face to face, just as someone speaks to a friend” (Ex33.11) – although we hear that this close encounter is still somewhat veiled because God spoke with Moses from the pillar of cloud that descended upon the tent of meeting.

Yet it has also been the very worst of times; despite such historic deliverances from their enemy, the Hebrew people have abandoned the living God even whilst Moses was in the act of receiving the great gift upon Mount Sinai. They built a Golden Calf and they bowed down and worshipped it. No wonder Moses is frightened that they will leave God behind on Mount Sinai; that they will forget what God has already done for them and because of their act of rebellion, they will be alone in the desert – lost, hungry and without hope or purpose.

So Moses pleads with God to promise again that things will be alright as he leads the Hebrews towards the Promised Land. Moses says, “You have not told us who will go with us.” He fears that leaving Mount Sinai will mean leaving God behind. This is not a totally unfounded fear: in Exodus 33.3 God has said he would not go with them because their disobedience, just demonstrated by the Golden Calf, might make him have to punish and destroy them on the way. So at that point God promised to send an angel with them.

So Moses pleads again: “Who will come with us?” So God, in his mercy, relents and says: “I will go with you.”

This fear that we may leave God behind us has constantly afflicted people of faith. On the one hand, we can hardly imagine that our God of love, who has called us by name, would ever abandon us. But the fear does not go away because we know inwardly that if God does abandon us it will be no more than we deserve.

The fear of leaving God behind debilitates. It results in people wanting to hang on to the past, to times and places where they were once secure in God’s favour. It results in people trying to recreate the past because they fear the future. They can see God back there, but cannot see God here or now so well, and cannot see God at all beckoning from the future’s distant horizon. Past history is essential in knowing who we are, what God has done for us and through us, and sets us on a trajectory for the present day and points towards our future. Moses needed to remind the people of their deliverance from Egypt and the hope of a land of their own once promised to Abraham. Without knowing their past, they would wander in the wilderness forever without purpose or direction. The past is not the Church’s enemy – it is the essential story that defines us and guides into the future. But the past is not where we are called to live.

We must see God not just in the past days of glory, but also here and now and beckoning us to follow him into the future.

Yet all around us we see examples of this same old fear; we see people trying to go back to the past for the elusive security they seek. Religious fundamentalism in all its forms is evidence of this fear. People willingly run away from the twenty-first century into pre-scientific, pre-Enlightenment ways of following Christ, or Moses, or Islam. It manifests itself in the subtle ways of those parts of the Catholic world seeking a way back to pre-Vatican II days of thinking about themselves. It manifests itself in Protestant fundamentalism. It manifests itself in an extreme fashion in the brutal, visceral hatreds such as we see in the ISIS state with its medieval beheadings, forced conversions and extreme sharia law.

We have the same dynamics at work in our New Testament reading: In Matthew 22 we see the opposition to Jesus from the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees saw God supremely in the Law of Moses and the keeping of all the details of the Mosaic Law and its subsequent interpretations. God was very much in the past for the Pharisees to the degree that they felt angered and threatened by Jesus’ claim that God was at work now through him. The Herodians looked upon the despotic Herod the Great as a hero and wished to uphold the Herodian dynasty, so they did not take kindly to Jesus’ messianic claims.

ii

In the controversy about paying tax to Caesar, Jesus is caught between two powerful political groups, the Herodians and the Pharisees. They appear united to us because they had a common hatred of Jesus, but there was little else they agreed on. The Herodians were pro-Roman and the Pharisees anti-Roman. Whichever way Jesus pronounced about paying tax to Caesar, it appeared he must offend either one party or the other.

The Herodians were supportive of the Herod dynasty, now being led in the days of Jesus’ adult life by the sons of Herod the Great who led regional governments across Palestine, Herod Antipas being the most famous.

Herod the Great’s father, Antipater, was originally an Edomite who worked as a civil servant for the Jewish king, but had helped the Roman general Pompey take over Jerusalem in 63BC from the dysfunctional Jewish Hasmonean dynasty and later also helped Julius Caesar in the Alexandrian War against Cleopatra in 47BC.

Antipater had been installed as governor of the newly conquered Jerusalem in 63BC and when the people of Jerusalem rebelled against Antipater’s son Herod the Great in 40BC, Herod went to Rome for help, where he was declared King of the Jews (no longer merely a governor). Herod the Great remained a supporter of the Roman occupation for the rest of his life. He wasn’t really Jewish and he was only a king through Roman diktat. Herod the Great lavished the Roman world with gifts and became famous even beyond Judea.

The Herodians that confronted Jesus are in this pro-Roman political tradition – a tradition that was temporarily strengthened at the time of Jesus’ ministry when in AD31 Emperor Tiberius decreed that the religious privileges of the Jews which excused them worshipping the emperor, granted first through the favour in which Antipater had been held, should still be respected throughout the empire.

The Herodian party was enthusiastically pro-Roman, the Sadducees were rather lukewarm but strove to keep the peace and their privileges, whereas the Pharisees were generally opposed to Rome, whilst the zealots were violently opposed and growing rapidly in influence during the years of Jesus’ ministry. Hence the trap set by them for Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar was effectively a pincer movement from two opposing camps.

Whilst the Pharisees failed to see God in Jesus in the here and now because they were fixated on what God had done in the past in the laws of Moses, the Herodians failed to see God in the face of Jesus Christ because they had bowed their knee to another face of authority – that of the emperor depicted upon the Roman coinage.

They deliberately flatter Jesus by pretending to admire his forthright and controversial manner in speaking in his own authority against the religious and political rulers of the day – a character trait which in reality they hated – but they hoped would now be his downfall.

If Jesus said yes to paying tax to Rome – thus siding with the Herodians – the Pharisees could use that against him to drive a wedge between Jesus and the common people who hated having to pay tax to Rome.

If Jesus, on the other hand, said they should not pay tax to Rome – thus siding with the Pharisees – the Herodians would be able to use that against him and get him arrested by either the Roman authorities or the henchmen of Herod Antipas, the pro-Roman king. The previous would-be Messiah, Theudas, had essentially led a tax revolt against Rome.

The Pharisees and Herodians were on opposing political sides, but both parties could see that it would be in their interests to get this latest, rabble-rousing, would-be Messiah out of the way.

When Jesus said, “Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor and pay God what belongs to God,” he neatly side-stepped their devious plan.

The most popular interpretation is that tax and obedience to the civil authority is permitted, but that must never over-ride one’s duty to God: This would anticipate the teaching of the Early Church found in 1 Peter 2.17: “Fear God, honour the emperor.” Or it could simply mean, if you think Caesar has a legitimate claim, pay up, but don’t forget the claim of God upon you. The emperor’s claim upon you is trivial beside the existential claim of God.

The crucial point is that the emperor’s face must never obscure or take precedence over the face of God. Both the Herodians and the Pharisees, as they looked upon the coin bearing the emperor’s face refused to see in Jesus standing before them the very face of God. That failure was to lead to other more desperate notions of what God was doing among them – misplaced, hubristic fantasies about God leading them to military victory over Rome, as both the Herodians and the Pharisees were later swept along by the surging tide of zealot-fuelled nationalism.

iii

For Jesus is the answer to those two great questions of faith:

Is God still with us today? How will we know that God is still with us in the future?

Moses’ second request is again a request that echoes across the centuries: How will I know that you are with me? Show me “the dazzling light of your presence.”

The great problem for Moses is that he is not permitted any graven image, statue or painting of God. When other nations around him can have their Asheroth in Caanan, or their statues of Amun and Ra in Egypt, the Israelites have no such image to worship, no such physical token of God’s presence. So how will Moses know and how will others recognise that God is present with them?

Once more, God responds mercifully to Moses. He has revealed himself before many times; firstly in the burning bush and the disclosure of the divine name; in the rod that turned into a serpent in the court of pharaoh; in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that parted the waters before them at the Red Sea; and daily in the tent of meeting God has spoken to Moses “face to face, like a friend.”

Yet it has not been quite face to face. God has hidden his face from Moses because neither Moses, nor any human can see the face of God and live. So God passes before Moses and reveals his divine glory, yet shields Moses from being exposed to his face – and permits Moses to see only his back (Ex33:23).

To permit someone to look at your face has traditionally been a way of exercising power. In some societies, commoners have had to bend their knee before the monarch and look to the ground as they pass. To look upon the face is not just about knowledge – it is also about power, status and privilege.

Moses may have been the greatest figure of the Jewish faith, but he was not permitted the more intimate and privileged relationship that allowed him to look God in the face. So speaking to God “face to face like a friend” mentioned in Exodus 33:11 wasn’t what it appears.

There can be no greater demonstration of God’s commitment to be with his people than the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son.

Now we have looked upon the face of God in Jesus. For “he who has seen me has seen the Father,” says Jesus (John 14:9).

Now the glory of God has shone in the face of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, who was “transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2).

Now we have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, for “God’s Spirit testifies with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

Now we have the mysterious presence of Christ with us in the sacramental bread and wine (Matthew 26:26).

Now Christ is evident to the whole world through his body, the church, “[For] God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:23).

The two perennial questions voiced by Moses have received their fullest answer in Christ. It is our task to help the world to see and hear so that they may be saved, by giving the world its due, but by giving God his due also.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**October 2014**