

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

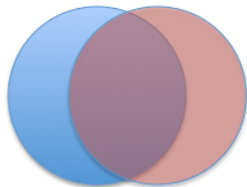
Twenty first Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 22 October 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-33

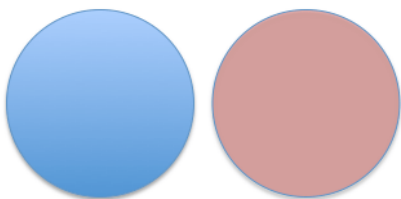
Throughout the centuries the Church has been told to stay out of politics. From Archbishop Thomas Beckett that troublesome priest in the 12th century, to our own Bishop Burgmann that meddlesome priest in the 20th we have been told to butt out. It was during the time of the Enlightenment the so-called Age of Reason that the idea of a separation between politics and religion was entrenched, and to varying degrees it survives to this day. To Jesus and to the people of his time and place and indeed for the first 1500 years of Christianity this made no sense at all, they were right. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was itself, a thoroughly political concept; Jesus' death was a thoroughly political event.

Those who call for this separation often quote the gospel text that we heard this morning: 'Render to the Caesar the things that are the Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' This is not what Jesus was advocating, however. I found these venn Diagrams recently which might help us:



This is the way the Pharisees, understood the spiritual and the political, they were inseparably intertwined, but what they really wanted was regime change! But this was something that Jesus has rejected, he has refused to pursue a political path, he rejected the political ambitions of those who would make him king, remember after the feeding of the 5,000 in John's gospel. The kingdom of God has political implications, but these can never be achieved by merely political means. It is a change of heart, not merely a change of regime, that the people need.

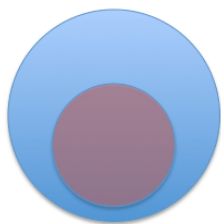
The next icon shows the complete separation of Religion and politics...God and Caesar:



So, on one hand we render unto Caesar what is his due: we pay our taxes, and we play our part in the civic life of our communities. And quite separately we render unto God what is God's due, we go to Church and play our part in parish life, so that our political, economic, and social lives are separate from our religious lives. Our life of faith becomes an interest or a hobby, or at best a set of important and motivating personal convictions—but it can never make claims over the political realm. It is a private rather than public truth.

This is not what Jesus was saying and indeed our Psalm too seems to say something else. The god's of the nations are mere idols. Render to the Lord, you families of nations, render to the Lord Glory and might. Whatever power the emperor or any other ruler has, they have it only because it has been delegated to them by God, as Jesus says explicitly to Pilate during the trial narrative in the Fourth Gospel (John 19.11).

So, political power and influence doesn't overlap with that of God's power, and Kingdom, neither is it separate from the concerns of the kingdom. Instead, it rightly sits within the concerns of God and God's authority. This is the last icon, there is so called political power nestled within the kingdom of God:



We heard this morning perhaps the oldest piece of New Testament writing, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. When Paul was roaming around the Mediterranean, including Thessaloniki, as the apostle to the Gentiles, the fastest growing religion was the Imperial cult, the worship of Caesar and we can see that in the coinage of the day.

The denarius that Jesus was shown would have had the image of the emperor, but also the inscription 'Ti[berius] Caesar Divi Aug[usti] F[ilius] Augustus' and on the reverse the title 'Pontif[ex] Maxim[us]', meaning High Priest. Little wonder Jesus describes the Pharisees and Herodians as hypocrites. Not only were they avowed enemies, but on the coins Tiberias is described as the Son of God, and high priest; the two titles together could hardly be more offensive to the Jews, what are they doing with these coins in their pockets?

Romans claimed they had brought peace and justice to the world, giving salvation from chaos, creating a new sense of unity out of previously warring pluralities. The accession of the emperor, and his birthday, was regarded as evangelion, good news. The emperor was the Kyrios, the lord of the world, the one who claimed the allegiance and loyalty of subjects throughout his vast empire. When he came in person to pay a state visit to a colony or province, the word for his royal presence or coming was Parousia. This is very familiar New Testament language, isn't it?

Paul used this language to announce a new way of thinking about God and God's authority. We can just glimpse this in this morning's opening to that very first letter. In the letter to the Romans some have suggested that Paul parodies the power of Rome. He didn't advocate the overthrow of the Romans, far from it, neither did he unequivocally call for an abandonment of the law, but both now needed to be understood within the context of the kingdom of God.

This is us today, we are not looking to overthrow the state, neither do we see our faith and the world of politics as separate. We strive to see all things through the lens of the kingdom of God. This is often an uncomfortable place to be. For many last weekend's referendum result was an example of that and I sensed the disappointment, many were discouraged; but our vision needs to be a broader one.

Our first reading this morning from Isaiah introduces the Cyrus the King of Persia. An unlikely figure to be seen to be doing God's work. The Jewish people have been taken captive to Babylon, it marks the end of the Davidic monarchy, the end of the Temple, the covenant and the culture and religion of the people. A generation later Cyrus in turn invades Babylon, liberates the Jews and allows them to return to rebuild the city. Isaiah's poetic vision sees God's hand at work, I pray that we can too in the difficult times in which we live. Amen.