

Proper 24 year A

Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.... probably the most often misinterpreted passage in the New Testament.... The interpretation, certainly amid the world of the nation state, our world... is that we have in essence two worlds side by side.... the world of the social, economic and political(the real world); and then the world of the spiritual. This passage has been held up over the ages as a justification of seeing these two worlds separately... and further it has been used to affirm the argument that the church has no business, nothing to do with the world "out there." It has been used to make the argument that the church needs to mind its own business apart from the mean ole' world out there; that the church is to keep its hands clean.... But such an interpretation couldn't be further from the truth.

First, let's put this passage in the context of what is going on in Matthew's gospel. In the two previous passages that we read in the two previous Sundays... Matthew is holding up for us what life is like under imperial rule... It is a life characterized by violence and rage... even murder... For Matthew, nor for his followers, there is no love for the Roman occupation... the same occupation that killed John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth... the same occupation that brought about the catastrophic destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.... So there's nothing Matthew is going to say in support of the empire.... In our narrative, Jesus holds up a small coin, like a penny and asks whose image is on it... For any Jewish listener an engraved image would be blasphemy.... I can imagine Jesus holding up this small coin (coinage was actually propaganda for the empire) holding up this small coin in mock grandeur and saying... "you know where the empire can stick this." And then with a sweep in artful contrast declaring that everything else, which is in fact, everything, belongs to God. This is not about two worlds side by side but one world as God sees it... one world that doesn't take or conscript, but a world that gives life and life abundant... Matthew is on the one hand describing a world of violence into which we are born... up and against the emerging kingdom of God that seeks to restore the created order into what God sees it to be... and the message is that such a vision requires everything of us... such a vision is our reason for living.... That we are not born for ourselves... that we are born to serve God's gracious order... and that means with all due passion and all due creativity we are to challenge power that corrupts and damages the people whom God loves.... And we are to change it.... If that is not what we live for then the rest is vanity.

This, in short, is an all or nothing proposition... the days of the church being the proverbial hospital for sinners... a place of refuge only... a place in which to merely feel good about ourselves... those days are over... that church is dying... the church is a community that is to empower God's people to enact the good and the true... that is what we do Sunday after Sunday in our liturgy... we act out in dramatic fashion God's vision for God's world... a world in which all are fed; in which dignity and well being is a right... and we celebrate that truth, the truth of who we are created to be in beauty (beautiful words, beautiful place, beautiful music, because beauty is irresistible; and beauty changes things. What we do in the church is an outward and visible sign of our life lived rightly in the world.... Our imaginations need reminding.... We remind ourselves here that we are intimately connected... thus a shared meal.... And we celebrate that intimacy bearing witness to the reality that to live on this earth... the earth God made is pure awe.

If I may I want to indulge myself a bit... My granddaughter Emery will be baptized today... we will initiate her into the life of faith... into a community that doesn't live for itself, but for the good of the world... a community called to participate in and act on behalf of God's vision for the world.... It is the life for which she was created... a life for which all of us are created... a life that will indeed require everything.... It is a dangerous life... a life of utter vulnerability.... A life in which the heart is undefended and open.

I've been thinking of Yeats' poem of late... A Prayer for my daughter... a poem written in 1923 in between the first and second world wars... It is a poem in which the poet sees the violence and rage into which his daughter has been born, a century, an age in which over 100 million people were slaughtered in warfare... On a dark night he hears the wrathful wind howling outside the tower of Thor Ballylee in which he and his family lived.... And he prays that his infant daughter live quite simply knowing beauty... because he knows as most poets know... that beauty is transformative and redemptive... that beauty insists on change, that beauty only knows to give... and that in our giving even the winds of evil are quelled, rendered mute.... Beauty is the means of mystery... and it is in mystery where God lives... and we are forever being invited into it.

So if I may, I wish to offer a prayer for my granddaughter, which I hope you'll hear as a prayer for all of us who gather in this place of faith, all of us who choose and have chosen the life of God, the life of mystery to bear to our world.

May she learn to trust deeply.... The slings and arrows of the world notwithstanding... may she trust always what is good and true .

May she practice honesty... lying takes way too much energy... may she be truthful so that she may be fully known.

May she have a heart of compassion...that she suffer with others and bear their burdens.

May she see herself in her neighbor and in those she loves... for to see oneself is to see God.

May she love the world, all of it, for its own sake.

May she be beautiful... and I mean gracious and kind and generous of spirit.

And may she live this short life with an abiding sense of awe and gratitude.

Dear people of God, think on these things, and may our joy her joy, be complete.... And in God's good time may all be well... all manner of thing be well.