**Sermon 18th Oct 2020**

St Luke the evangelist wrote Luke’s gospel and Acts. He was the only Gentile author in Bible and several individuals and parables are unique to his gospel, including Zaccheus and the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He was a physician. Let me read the opening verses of his gospel. *Read Lk 1:1-4*. I’ll come back to those words later.

Today I’d like to look at Luke’s account of the well-known incident when Jesus was challenged about paying taxes to Caesar which we heard read a moment ago. The setting was Jerusalem, at or near the temple, very shortly before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion and within a period of intense confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities. Luke tells us that spies arrived seeking to trap Jesus by something he said. Matthew tells us that those who came were a mixture of disciples of the Pharisees and also some Herodians (a group who supported the Herod dynasty) – these were very unlikely bedfellows but they were united in seeing Jesus as a threat to their power bases. Why you might ask did the pharisees send disciples rather than more senior staff and why greet Jesus so politely? It was all part of a ploy to appear innocuous and catch Jesus off guard. Their carefully prepared plan was to ask a question requiring a yes or no answer, either of which would incriminate Jesus. If he’d said yes to paying taxes to Caesar he would have been very unpopular with the heavily burdened and overtaxed people and be seen to be siding with Rome; if he’d said no to paying them he could be reported to the Romans as an insurrectionist and they had the power to put him to death.

Jesus of course sees through it all and asks to see a denarius, the coin used to pay the tax. And here it is (*show* *picture*). “Whose portrait and inscription are on it” says Jesus. “Caesar’s” is the answer, specifically there was Tiberius Caesar’s image on one side with the Latin inscription “Tiberius Caesar, son of divine Augustus” in Latin on the perimeter of the coin. “Then” says Jesus “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

What exactly is Jesus saying here and what does it mean for us today? He was not seeking to establish a political kingdom to oppose Caesar and his followers would continue to have obligations to the ruling authorities. This point would later be echoed both by Paul in Romans 13 and Peter in 1 Peter 2, each of whom says that, in principle, governments are God’s means of ensuring order in society, therefore we should pay our taxes and obey the law. Giving to God, on the other hand, which Jesus also stresses is not simply like paying a tax, it’s of a different order. While the image of Caesar may have been stamped on coins, human beings bear the image of God in creation, thereby God has a claim on all we have and all we are. For example we are stewards of all God has created and we should treat the world accordingly. Both the state and the kingdom of God have rights in their respective areas but this doesn’t mean that our lives are to be lived in two separate compartments. Our obligation to God should take precedence and we should serve the state in a way which honours him.

In practice, when faced with the challenge of living in the world while maintaining their integrity before God there is the danger of religious leaders going to extremes. Some may

withdraw like the Essenes of the Qumran community (authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls) or withdraw socially like the Pharisees. Other groups may capitulate by joining with the state like the Sadducees and Herodians, or fighting against it like the Zealots. Nowadays there are Christian groups who withdraw from society, such as the Amish, while others are prepared to use violence for example by attacking abortion clinics. Jesus’ words when asked about paying taxes to Caesar should help us to stay balanced.

One group who got it right were the early Christians at Thessalonica. They’d already experienced persecution but, as Paul says in his first letter to them (which may be the earliest surviving Christian writing) “The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you in every place where your faith in God has become known.” And I’m sure they paid their taxes.

On the question of abortion which I mentioned a moment ago, and wanting to be balanced, I arranged a debate on the issue when I worked at a hospital in Edinburgh. We had three speakers – a senior doctor at the hospital who performed abortions, a Christian GP friend of mine from Glasgow who was strongly against the practice and a professor from down south who had pioneered 4D scanning of the fetus in the womb, the 4th dimension being time. He wasn’t a Christian but in his talk he said that his work had significantly changed his attitude, he was now much more cautious about abortion especially if performed later in pregnancy. And when we came to the discussion time afterwards it was very interesting that, of the three speakers, it was the professor who got the most flak from the audience, many of whom had got used to abortion happening. Why did they pick on him? Because they saw him as one of their own who’d gone soft and was letting the side down. Sobering.

I think there is a common theme in all of this – about witnessing to the truth and putting first things first. Jesus did exactly that as he answered the question about paying taxes to Caesar, Luke did it in the opening words of his Gospel “I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning and am writing an orderly account” and in his own way so did the professor with his scan pictures. He was presenting an orderly account of the appearance of the fetus in the womb. He might have added “and whose image do you see in these pictures? Is it not our own as human beings? And if so, should we not take notice?”

*Amen*