

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 25 October 2020 11.00am
Rev Peter Cornick

'Whose head is this, and whose title?'
Matthew 22: 15-21

Jesus says 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' Does this ever cause a clash? At the end of Prisons Week, what are the consequences for law breakers?

Introduction

I want to show you a video filmed in Katherine Price Hughes House, one of WLM's projects. The voices you hear are residents and staff telling their story; the artwork was painted by a resident.

Video (2:35) ¹

The residents you heard, are former prisoners. They have experienced the consequences of breaking the law of the land. They have experienced 'retribution – or punishment'. They are now coming to terms not with being locked down, but with release. We have all had a short experience of being locked down – who amongst us thought being released would cause us so much anxiety and stress.

KPH offers those residents, support and skills for the next stage in, hopefully, a new life.

Prisons Week, calls us to pray and take positive action for all involved in the prison system. Our Circuit project, WLM KPH, takes action to offer 'restoration'. We pray for its residents, and for Brigette and her staff team.

The law

Keeping the Law is something we usually try to do – but on occasions, it might conflict with what we feel is God's Law.

¹ <https://youtu.be/vlPKvxqf-ZQ>

It is Black history month, so we might recall how someone like Rosa Parks broke the law. She refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. She was duly arrested for breaking the law but is now hailed as a leading woman of the civil rights movement.

Less well known is Guy Bailey. He didn't so much break the law, but tried to get a job. In 1963, he was barred from becoming a bus driver in Bristol because he was black. His case led to the Bristol bus boycott. The management – and this is astonishing – were not breaking the British law in their discrimination. The Bristol bus strike contributed to the Race Relations Acts of the later 60s.

Recovering Black history helps us all acknowledge the part our society played in racial discrimination. I felt uncomfortable to learn that the Trade Union for bus drivers, the TGWU, now Unite – of which I am a member – colluded with the management in Bristol, to retain only white bus crews. Unite apologised in 2013.²

Sometimes the law is at odds with justice. To give to both the Emperor and to God – contradictory.

Whose head is this and whose title?

Jesus is embroiled in a conflict with the Jewish leaders. He has recently suggested to them, using the analogy of the vineyard, that whilst they keep God's Law, its fruit is not very good. No wonder there is a conflict.

So, the Pharisees set out to entrap Jesus. This passage goes beyond good natured rabbinic debate over points of Law. This is an engineered plot. The word 'entrap' is used nowhere else in the New Testament. It is specific to this one moment; calculated; has its origins in hunting down animal prey.

..... He might accuse us of not keeping the spirit of God's Law – let's see if he keeps the Law himself!

So, some Pharisees and Herodians are deputed to go to Jesus.

² <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/civil-rights-movement/what-was-behind-the-bristol-bus-boycott-of-1963/>

You don't often hear of the Herodian party. But it is relevant that both Pharisees and Herodians go to him together. For whatever Jesus answers, he can't please both Pharisees and Herodians.

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'

The Pharisees detested the Romans. Tiberias was emperor at the time. The Pharisees objected to the emperor claiming on the coins, the status of 'Divine'. They carefully distinguished between Roman coins and Temple coins. So, to pay tax to the 'Divine' emperor, was blasphemy – (although the Pharisees did so to keep the Romans from interfering in the Jewish Law.)

The Herodians however, were known to collude with the Romans. Whatever Jesus does think, he is bound to upset someone.

So this conflict is less about deliberately breaking the law of the land – even for a just cause. It is more about how one keeps the first commandment: to have no other divine god's before God.

So ... 'entrapped' ... Jesus takes a Roman coin.

²⁰ Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?'
Tiberius – the Divine ...

²¹ Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

For now at least, Jesus has escaped the trap. Kept both Roman and God's Law.

Two sides to the same coin

Let me take you back to the work of KPH with former prisoners.

Because for us, there may be two sides to the same coin.

It is right for prisoners to face up to the consequences of crime – unless they are prisoners of conscience. To accept punishment.

Receive 'retribution'. We pay taxes to make that happen. But our taxes also pay – in part – for places like WLM's KPH. What we give to Her Majesty – whether we like the title 'Majesty' or not – pays for the former prisoner in the video to receive help with computer skills. To log onto his benefits or to find a job. It pays in part, for a group of former prisoners to sit in a meditation group with a Chaplain, which I

experienced on my last 'in person' visit. So, whilst it is often forgotten, the prison system is involved in 'restoration' as well – because you pay your taxes to Her Majesty.

It would be deceptively simple to make a distinction between giving a coin to the state and a coin to God. But today, it isn't always so simple. Yet, through our small part to play in the prison system, WLM's Katherine Price Hughes House, we offer to God, what is God's, with prayer; with thanksgiving.

Conclusion

Giving to the emperor – or the Queen – and giving to God, are perhaps two sides of the same coin. As, in the prison system, are retribution and restoration. Two sides of one coin.

Whose head and whose title do we see on the coins we use?

²¹'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'