

Homily for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity (Remembrance Sunday)

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday, 12 November 2023 (The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity, Remembrance Sunday), by The Reverend Dr Mike Michielin, Rector, St John's, Kingston, Canada

ISAIAH 11.1-10; PHILIPPIANS 3.17-21; ST. MATTHEW 22.15-22

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. ST. MATTHEW 22.21

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

IN the Gospel lesson today, Jesus seems to distinguish between what we owe to Caesar and what we owe to God, between our civic obligations on the one hand and our religious duties on the other. It is certainly important for us to be aware of the distinction, especially on Remembrance Sunday when we honour and respect, as we should, the many who have died and fought for God and country. But if we are to be faithful to the text, this is not really what the Gospel story is about.

The story begins with a surprising unholy alliance between the Herodians, who were supporters of the ruling house of Herod, and the Pharisees, Jewish patriots who were deeply committed to the tradition of the ancient law. The Herodians and Pharisees hated each other. The Herodians were contemptuous of the Pharisees' puritanism. The Pharisees were utterly horrified by the pagan practices introduced by the Herodians. But they agreed on one thing. Jesus must be stopped because He was a threat to their respective positions of power.

When Our Lord was teaching in the temple, a few days before His death, they plotted together how they might entangle Jesus in His talk by asking Him this question: *tell us, what thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give*

tribute to Caesar, or not? It was a clever question. If Jesus approved of the tax, He would lose the support of all Jews who hated their Roman rulers. If He disapproved of it, He would be perceived as a dangerous revolutionary against the established government.

What should strike us is not their malice and envy against Christ, although unacceptable, but rather the little, low, earthly thoughts that possessed them. Their petty disputes and lust for earthly power was so great, they would do anything to maintain it. They were even prepared, says Paul, *to glory in their own shame* by making an unholy alliance with each other to achieve their earthly goal. But what is even more shameful is they have no room in their hearts for the Incarnate King of Glory Himself. They are like Judas weighing in the balance earth and heaven, putting on one scale thirty pieces of silver, and on the other the eternal weight of glory; and finding a mere thirty pieces of silver outweigh it. In a sermon of C. S. Lewis called *Weight of Glory*, he says this,

Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because we cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

How can the Herodians and Pharisees be so easily pleased?

But before we point our fingers at them too quickly, beware of Paul's warning to us. Why does Paul *weep*, or better, *for whom* does he weep? He is weeping for those who had witnessed Paul's preaching and his life, who call themselves Christians and yet, somehow, forgot the Cross. Paul is weeping not just for them. He is also weeping for you and me because, like these *enemies of the Cross of Christ*, he knows how easy and unaware we can be to *mind earthly things* and worship *the God of our bellies*. Did the Herodians and Pharisees realise whom they were rejecting and the dangerous position they placed their souls in? No. Neither did those whom Paul weeps for, or he would not have been so despairing of them.

What are these *earthly things* we can so easily rest our thoughts, desires, joys, and fears on if we are not careful? I only have first-hand experience of the pressures Christians are experiencing to conform to cultural norms in Canada, although my guess is the same pressures exist here in the UK. Many of our institutions and the media in Canada are influenced by postmodern ‘critical theories’ rooted in the philosophies expressed by some as ‘wokeism’. They privilege a way of seeing the world as raw material out of which meaning, and purpose, can be created by the individual. We are told to be deeply sceptical of any truth claims, except, of course, one’s own. Consequently, we live in a politically antagonistic, binary society in which, depending on which side you are on, you are either a friend or foe. It is no wonder regarding the present war in Israel/Gaza, you must choose sides; you must be either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel. There is no in-between. When you combine these cultural pressures to *mind earthly ideologies*, with, sadly, increasing pressures within our own church to adopt them, confusion and uncertainty can easily set in.

Fortunately, Paul also offers us some guidance. First, he tries to encourage us by reminding us that *our citizenship is in heaven*. Our citizenship is not just a future reality, although it can certainly feel that way. It is also a present one. We need not be anxious about our citizenship and place alongside Christ with the Father in the Spirit. *God*, as today’s collect says, *is our refuge* here and now. God is our refuge because, Augustine reminds us, we are *stamped with Christ’s image, Christ’s name, Christ’s gifts, and Christ’s way of life*. Furthermore, we can trust this is true because Jesus came down to us as a man for one reason, to take us home. And He has secured our way home to be with His Father by His death on a Cross and His resurrection. Our citizenship and path back to our country is secure.

But in the meantime, we are also citizens of this world. How do we make sure to not confuse our allegiance between our heavenly and earthly citizenships? Again, Paul helps us out. Paul goes on to say, as citizens of heaven living in a foreign country, we are to *look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ*. Paul is not suggesting we have no responsibilities as citizens of this world. But we should never divide our allegiances between Caesar and

God whenever we engage in these responsibilities because all things are of God, and we are stamped with God's image.

When Paul tells us to *look for the Saviour*, he is not referring to a simple looking over one's shoulder the odd time. He is reminding us that the Christian life is characterised as a pilgrimage, shaped by a longing to return home to be with our Lord. What is our quest for happiness but a desire for the good? What is the good but participation in the pure and perfect good which is God Himself? We are like the Psalmist whose *soul hath a desire and a longing to enter the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God* (Ps. 84.2). Since God made man in his image and likeness, our souls desire one thing, to return to Him.

But how does our journey back home not get sidetracked? How can we be sure we do not *mind earthly things* and acquiesce to the temptation to follow the *Gods of our bellies*, as did the Herodians, Pharisees, and Paul's brethren? Again, Paul gives us an answer. He tells us to *be followers together of me and mark them which walk so as ye have us for ensample*. In other words, Paul invites us to follow his example of a life of holiness. For yes, God is our refuge, but today's collect also says, God is the *author of all godliness*. But we also have a role to play.

That role involves the cultivation of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity by engaging in, since we are Anglicans, the Prayer Book's disciplines. By submitting ourselves to its disciplines and habitual practice of prayer, Bible reading, regular reception of Holy Communion, fasting, repentance, and self-examination, *God*, as it says in the collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter, '*orders the unruly wills and affections of sinful men*' so that '*our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found*'.

But to what end do we engage in Prayer Book disciplines to help us cultivate Christian virtues? *So*, says the collect, *our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found*. What does this joy consist of? Again, Paul tells us, *Christ shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body*. Christ desires to glorify you and me as He is glorified. How can this be so? Dante asked the same question to Beatrice in

canto 1 of *Paradisio*. Beatrice has just brought Dante from Purgatory to Paradise. Dante struggles to comprehend how he, a mere mortal, *should rise so high, beyond the lightness of the air and fire*. Then Beatrice turns to Dante *with a sigh of pity, as mother in distress whose child is ill and talks deliriously* and says, *no more amazement it should bring you that you ascend, than if a mountain stream should tumble rushing to the plains below*.

We are made for the stars. We are made for the love of God which transcends us. Of course, we cannot ascend there ourselves. That is the sin of Satan who said to Adam and Eve, *if you eat this apple then you can be as gods*. But to be *as gods* and fallen creatures who glory in their shame and end in destruction, that is unnatural. What is natural is for us, now that Christ has prepared the way back home, is to ascend to the Heavenly Jerusalem and enter God's glory and joy.

The glory and joy God promises us is beyond description. But, as C. S. Lewis says, *once you get a glimpse of it, you'll want something which can hardly be put into words To be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, and become part of it. It is like when you see a beautiful beach on a beautiful sunny day. You don't just want to see it. You want to jump in and bathe in it*.

Do not settle for anything less.