

The trap that backfired
19 October 2014

Matthew 22:15-22

One thing I have never done is serve on a jury, and this is not something I am upset about. It may have once appealed in the past, but it is not something I have any real desire to do any more. This is partly because of the potential inconvenience: several years ago, a work colleague found herself on the jury for a murder trial, which left us a team member down for six weeks. And partly because I don't really want to find myself sitting in judgment of someone else.

However, I was summoned to be a juror on two separate occasions back in the early 1990s. On the first occasion, I managed to excuse myself because I was going to be away. But on the second occasion, I went along, and found myself spending an hour or two every morning at the Wellington District Court every day for a week, drinking their appalling excuse for coffee. And while I never actually made it onto a jury, I did come close one day. But just as I was about to sit down, I was challenged by the prosecution.

Later that morning, before I was excused for the day, I encountered a lawyer I knew. I explained what had been happening, and he told me he knew about the trial I had just missed out on being part of. It sounded like it was going to be most interesting. The charges related to the alleged supply of a controlled substance. But I was told there was some evidence of possible entrapment by undercover police, which sounded more like coercion, and that there was the likelihood of case law being set. It sounded so fascinating that I was disappointed that I had been rejected as a juror.

Entrapment is nothing new. Dirty tricks are as old as humankind, and as today's gospel reading tells us, Jesus' opponents weren't above such trickery. Both the Pharisees and the Herodians were involved. And it needs to be pointed out that these groups were not natural allies. You will all be familiar with the Pharisees. They were a Jewish faction that placed a strong emphasis on interpretation and observance of Jewish law. They could very loosely be called the fundamentalists of their day. But the Herodians were, as their name suggests, supporters of the Herodian family, and therefore indirectly aligned to Rome. But both factions appeared to have formed an unholy alliance, as they were united in feeling threatened by Jesus.

At first glance, their trap seems quite clever. They asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. The paying of taxes to the Romans was a hot issue. The Jews did not like paying them. And

who can blame them? Imagine having your country taken over by a foreign power, which then taxes you for the privilege? If Jesus had supported paying the taxes, he would have lost all credibility with his Jewish followers.

But if he had publicly opposed the taxes, he would have had the Romans come down on him like a tonne of bricks. In the year 6 in the Common Era, when Jesus would have been a boy, Judas the Galilean (not to be confused with Judas Iscariot) had led a tax revolt against the Romans that resulted in some pretty horrific reprisals. So Jesus would have been well aware of the consequences of trying to deny the Romans the revenue to which they felt they were entitled.

So it is not surprising that the usual explanation given for this story is that Jesus gave a clever answer that avoided either undesirable outcome. But I think this falls short of the mark.

Jesus was in Jerusalem. He knew that the end was rapidly approaching and that in a few days he would be handed over to the Romans to be flogged and crucified. The events described in today's gospel reading actually took place in Holy Week, which would be easy to overlook given the Lectionary places the reading in another season of the Church's calendar. So saying something now that would have upset the Romans would have not changed what was going to eventuate. Which suggests Jesus had other motives for evading the trap that had been set for him.

The Jews had their own coins, but their laws forbade them from having faces on them. And as we have noted, they had to pay taxes to the Romans. And there were various taxes. But the despised poll tax, which was the one being discussed, had to be paid in Roman currency. And Jesus asked to see a denarius, the coin that was used to pay the poll tax.

I have a Roman denarius here, which I will pass around for you all to look at. It dates from more than 200 years after Jesus' day, but it is still a genuine denarius. If you look it closely, you will see it has an image on each side. And on one side there is the image of the emperor, which in this case is Aurelian. So while it was bad enough that the Jews had to pay taxes to the Romans, having to use a coin with a blasphemous image was beyond the pale.

And this is where I believe we see the real genius of Jesus' response. He got his enemies to produce one of the hated coins. And it showed for all to see that they carried and quite probably used

the dreaded currency. This would be like finding the head of the Smokefree Coalition in possession of a half smoked packet of cigarettes, or catching the President of the Vegetarian Society buying bacon. The Pharisees and Herodians had attempted to destroy Jesus' reputation, but their trap backfired, and instead they had damaged their own standing.

Before I finish though, let me go back to Jesus' response after being handed to the coin, namely that we should give to the emperor those things that are the emperor's, and give to God those things that are God's. He was reminding us that we cannot ignore our obligations in this world, while we anticipate the world to come.

But I think Jesus was also alluding to his dual natures: divine and human. All of humankind was estranged from God. But we were given a way to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human in Jesus, experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life. Including death. And remember, Jesus' death was rapidly looming. But he triumphed over death with His Resurrection, which brings hope for us all.

Darryl Ward

19 October 2014

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