

Engaging Empire Pentecost 18 – 16th October 2011

Readings:

Matthew 22: 15-22

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel haunted. But it's not your everyday garden variety ghost that haunts me. With me, it is portions of scripture, especially words said by Jesus. This past week the haunting started during last Sunday's service. Those of you who were there will attest to the high energy that was there, but I have to confess my ambivalent feelings about flags. I've always been uncomfortable about flags in churches, for they describe another allegiance, an allegiance that sometimes is at odds with my primary allegiance to the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. So during the service I started to hear Jesus' haunting words - "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." I guess that's why I countered the presence of so many flags here with the children's creation of God's flag - the rainbow - a flag that serves not to divide, but unite. But that was last week.

But those words of Jesus, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." are not as easy as they sound. How do we differentiate? The Church down through the centuries has had great difficulty in doing so. In fact there have been times when the Church and State have been pretty much the same thing. When that happens it is usually the values of the state that win out over the gospel of Christ.

Historically I think of the emperor Constantine going to war under the flag of the Cross, a symbol transformed by Christ to represent life not death. I think of the Holy Roman Empire which was anything but holy, conquering people with great brutality, offering baptism or death. Then there were the Crusades, where we have vast armies of good Christians blasphemously willing to kill unbelievers under the flag of the cross, and finally the founding of the Church of England where the needs of empire were seen as greater than the pursuing of Christ's kingdom values, where a new church is formed to provide a loophole for an adulterous king. And I hear Jesus' haunting words, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

But it's not just in days gone by when empire has trumped God's vision for the world. The empire in recent years has been centred in a country which has called upon God to lead them into unwinnable wars described by some of their enemies as Christian Crusades. Flag, country and Christ can become one, all the more so when leaders have to toe a particular religious line. And when that happens it is usually at the expense of the Christ and his Gospel.

So the question still remains: how do we give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's?

Well as I've already said, the haunting continued through the week. The first half of my

week was spent at a School of Ministry retreat where we were confronted by the vast differences between the values of empire and the values of God. Rev. Elenie Poulos, the National Director of UnitingJustice, based in Sydney, spoke of her work and again the haunting words came streaming through, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

So we saw how values of empire were said to be centred on a scarcity of commodities that have to be fought for, whereas God's values centre on limitless grace and love. The empire believes in unlimited growth of the economy, whereas God's economy insists on the good stewardship of creation. In the empire, the individual rules, but in God's economy it is always community. In empire the resources of the planet are to be exploited to the hilt, whereas God's economy looks to care and compassion with all creation. And in empire there is a belief in trickle-down benefits coming from the largesse of the mega-rich, whereas God's economy has always preferred to have justice for all.

More than ever before, human beings need to accept the values of God. In a world driven by greed, where the global economy of empire demands more and more as we careen drunkenly towards ecological disaster, global militarism, and the global food, energy and financial crises, God's economy calls us to the kingdom of heaven, here and now. Calls us to imagine and dream ourselves into a new reality, a world where wellbeing is seen as being more important than economic growth; where simplicity, compassion, and hospitality is lived out rather than an encouragement to hoard, exclude and exploit. Where local economies guide our communities and there is a desire for peace, justice and reconciliation, and where there is a respect for our planet that leads to wellbeing for all God's creatures.

And I discovered that the Uniting Church has always seen the need to engage with empire by always bringing to its notice the economy of God - to give to empire, the powers that be, that which is in harmony with God's kingdom. So at the very birth of the Uniting Church in 1977 we have these prescient words in a Statement to the Nation, that say,

"Finally, we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is God under whose judgement the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church as an institution within the nation must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive."

So it has been for the past 34 years that the Uniting Church has been a prophetic thorn in the side of the body politic, always bring the empire to account when God's values are subsumed or ignored.

In recent days "Giving to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" has meant our church has produced these documents, "Dignity in Humanity - Recognising Christ in Every Person", "Asylum Seekers and Refugee Policy - A Christian perspective", "For the Sake of the Planet and All its People", "Uniting for Peace", and "An Economy of Life - re-imagining human progress for a flourishing world." I believe that more than any other church the Uniting Church acts as a body that is always seeking to witness to empire the values of God.

And just as I thought I had sermon-ed out Jesus' haunting words, Jenny and I attended the opening of the new Salvation Army's building called, "The Re-developed Launceston Corp & Social Programs Facility", a mouthful of a title, but better than the old title of "Salvation Army Citadel". A magnificent purpose-built building that will bring mission and deed together on the one site. But the haunting words at the opening were not from the gospel but were offering the same challenge to empire, this time from a scratchy recording of William Booth. We sung a song based on his words and these are the word of the song:

*"While women weep in darkness,
while men are lost in pain,
while children go on crying,
I'll tell of how you came,
to break the chains of bondage,
to wash away the shame,
Lord, I'll fight to glorify your name,
I'll live to tell of how you came.*

*Lord I hear you crying
reaching for your lost,
reaching out to show them,
your mercy, grace and love
Lord I hear you crying
And Lord I will respond
Lord, I'll fight to glorify your name,
I'll live to tell of how you came."*

Now whilst the Uniting Church and the Salvation Army go about it in very different ways, I believe we both see our primary role as being a prophetic one, constantly calling our world, our nation, our community to shun the values of empire and to live the life of the cosmic Christ, or in the words of my haunting: to give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

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