

Dear Friends,

In this week's gospel reading Jesus is asked a trick question. When they asked their question the Pharisees simply wanted to get Jesus into trouble. They knew that if he answered one way he would upset the crowds, but if he answered the other way he would upset the authorities. Jesus saw the trap they had set for him and avoided it by his answer, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and render to God what is God's." Jesus didn't mean by that teaching that there are two separate parts of life, God's part and the rest, with a dividing line down the middle.

What Jesus taught is that as Christians our supreme loyalty is to God alone, everything else is subsidiary to that. All authority and power is only held under the authority of God. We do owe loyalty and obedience to those in authority over us, but our first loyalty and our first obedience is to God.

Most of the time there isn't any conflict between the two loyalties, obeying God means obeying the authorities. But sometimes those two loyalties may pull us in two different directions, obeying God may lead us to disobey those in authority over us. We saw that some years ago in South Africa. The churches and church leaders were right at the forefront of the opposition to apartheid. Some decades earlier in Germany the confessing church was one of the very few groups who stood out against the government of Hitler. Some of its leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer were executed for their opposition to the Nazi authorities.

As Christians we shouldn't just tamely submit to the state and those in authority, everything they do should be measured against God's will and purpose. That's where it becomes rather complicated, because we have different views of what God's will is. We each only see part of the truth and often we see different parts. That's why there are many debates in the church about what action should be taken on certain issues. Because God's will isn't unmistakably clear to us, there will be differences of opinion. The teaching of Jesus does however remind us that our first loyalty is to God.

Best wishes,

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