

Small Group Faith Fellowship #5

Week of Sunday, November 8th 2015 –Trinity XXIII and Octave of All Saints

Daniel 1 *how Daniel and his friends resisted assimilation by the luxurious lifestyle of the Babylonian court and how God caused them to flourish in the alien setting.*

Philippians 3:17-21 *Our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we look for the Savior.*

Matthew 22:15-*Render unto God the things that are God's.*

Background:

A tale of Two Cities

Jerusalem: The Pharisees challenge Jesus on the question of the hated Roman poll tax. If Jesus comes out in favour of Caesar's tax, then he seems to take sides with the pagan empire against the freedom of Israel, and will alienate the Jews - but if he comes out against the tax, he will be in trouble with Rome. Jesus turns the tables on them, by telling them to produce the tribute money, and asking them whose image and superscription it is. When they produce the coin, and answer that it is Caesar's, they have just admitted the coin belongs to Caesar: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" Jesus tells them, "and unto God the things that are God's". Since the coin that bears Caesar's image belongs to him, give it back when he asks: and since you belong to God, and are made in his image, then give yourselves back to God! Thus Jesus does not get caught in their trap - but at the same time insists that all that we are and all that we have belongs to God.

Modern ears, acclimatized to the separation of church and state, often think that Jesus is saying that God and Caesar divide the world between them, with God getting an hour on Sunday morning (though more at St. John's) and Caesar getting the rest of the week! - and we naively think we have solved the tension between God and Caesar, Christians and world. It is highly unlikely Jesus thought anything of the sort. If God is God, then he must be first in *every* area of life, not just "religion": if we have a duty to Caesar, it is only because it pleased God to set him in authority over us, and so we do our duty to Caesar as part of our duty to God - even if that is suffering the humiliation of paying tax to a government we resent.

There is **no denying the tension** between the authority of Caesar and of God -but its resolution is to be worked out on God's terms and not man's – and how does this happen? When the Pharisees and their allies invoked the power of Caesar to crucify Jesus, true to his teaching, Jesus did not resist the power, but submitted outwardly in his body to the unjust judgment of Caesar - yet in doing so gave himself to the will and righteous judgment of God. Because he did so, God vindicated him against his accusers, by raising him from the dead, and making him Lord of all - including Caesar!

Thus those who believe in him find themselves in two worlds at once. Outwardly, visibly, bodily they are still in this world in its alienation from God, under Caesar's power, and subject still to all its sorrows - but inwardly, invisibly, spiritually and truly they are no longer alienated from God but reconciled to him, free from guilt and fear, full of hope for salvation, and full of love for the one who saved them at such cost to himself. In the world but not of the world - no longer dependent on the world's approval for our happiness, because we have the approval of God given us in Jesus Christ through faith, and we are no longer afraid of the world because their hope is in the might of his power to save.

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony in northern Greece - a center for the diffusion of Roman power and influence - its pride in its Roman status, laws, and privileges was expressed in the building of a temple for the worship of Caesar as Son of God, as Lord and Saviour. So the danger for Christians of Philippi is not that of the Jews of Jerusalem - it's not rebellion against the godless world-empire, but reliance upon it, and conformity to it. Paul warns the Philippians against following the example of some unnamed Christians, whom he indicts for fatally compromising the faith by the lives they live: "enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, who glory in their shame, who mind earthly things". They have trimmed their Christianity to fit the outlook of the world, and have resolved the tension between God and Caesar in favor of Caesar.

So Paul restates the tension - in contrast to cross-hating, belly-worshipping, earthly-minded worldly Christians, *our citizenship [our commonwealth] is in heaven* - we are in the world, but we are not of the world. As Philippi was a colony or outpost of Rome in northern Greece, a center for the diffusion of imperial power and influence - so the church is a colony or outpost of God's kingdom here on earth - a center for diffusion of his influence and power among all men.

The true resolution of this tension lies in the future, in the return of Christ in glory, in the transforming power of his resurrection: *we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself*. Jews looked for a worldly Messiah to deliver them from Roman rule - and the Gentiles looked to the Roman world-emperor to save them from the barbarians - but Christians look for the crucified and risen Messiah from heaven, to deliver them in the resurrection of the dead, in the regeneration of heaven and earth, when God shall be all in all. That's the only true resolution of the tension in which we live, in which inner and outer, body and soul, God and the world, will finally enter into harmony - and anything short of that is a cheat and a deception.

Open:

What did you hear in this Sunday's teaching? What struck you the most?

Was there anything that was new to you, or surprised you?

Was there anything that puzzled you? anything you did not understand?

Did it raise any questions or issues for you?

Dig:

Today's lessons are "political". They about the relation of the Christian community to God and to the world ("Caesar") - the tension between them, and how that tension might be resolved. Who do we trust to save us? Where do we put our heart's allegiance? And what happens to the other 'saviors' and 'lords' in our lives?

What is the tension that the Jews were feeling? How do you think the Pharisees wanted to resolve this tension?

For many modern readers, "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" means dividing our lives into separate compartments – with "God" in charge of a realm of private emotion we call religion, and "Caesar" in charge of everything else. It is highly unlikely that Jesus or the Pharisees thought in these terms of divided allegiance. If God is God, then there is no realm in which we do not owe him total allegiance with all that we are and all that we have. What then is the place of Caesar, what do we render him, and why? Why would Jesus not be in favour of defying Roman power?

The Jewish enemies of Jesus invoked the hated Gentile power of Roman Caesar to have him crucified. Jesus submitted outwardly, but his real submission was to the will of God. God responded to his perfect obedience with his own power, by raising him from the dead, and making him Lord of all (including Caesar!) Those who believe in Jesus follow him in his death and resurrection: outwardly we are still in the kingdom of Caesar, inwardly we are in the Kingdom of God. What does that mean for the way a Christian relates to Caesar and to God?

The Gentiles of Philippi were very proud of their privileged status as a colony (outpost) of Roman power in northern Greece, a center for diffusion of Roman influence. The symbol of this deep attachment to Roman power was the temple built for worshipping Caesar as a god, who is lord and savior. For the Christian converts in Philippi, what tension might they face both outwardly and inwardly? What resolution of this tension does Paul find it necessary to warn them against?

Gentiles of Philippi took pride in their Roman citizenship, and looked for security to Caesar as Savior and Lord. How does Paul address that point of view in vv. 20-21?

What event is he looking for to resolve the tension of God and Caesar? What will it mean for Christians? What will it mean for the world?

If the church is a colony or outpost of the heavenly kingdom on earth, what does this teaching suggest about its character and purpose?

Close:

What part of this Sunday's teaching do you think needs further exploration?

How might this Sunday's teaching be applied in your life?

Pray:

Thank God for bringing everyone together in fellowship for the sharing of faith. Thank him for the gift of his Word and Spirit, and ask him for help to know and experience more fully the gift of his grace in your life.

Scriptures

Philippians 3:17-21

Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. ¹⁸ (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: ¹⁹ Whose end is destruction, whose God is their

belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)²⁰ For our conversation¹ is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:²¹ Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body², according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. ¹⁶ And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. ¹⁷ Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? ¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? ¹⁹ Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. ²⁰ And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? ²¹ They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. ²² When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.

¹ "Conversation" in KJV means "way of life" or "conduct, behavior", but the Greek *politeuma* is often translated "citizenship" or "commonwealth" to catch the overtones of political community.

² In the American Prayer Book, this is rendered "the body of our humiliation, that we may be conformed to the body of his glory".