

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Pentecost 23, October 19, 2008, Proper 24, Exodus 33: 12-23, Psalm 96: 1-9, I Thessalonians 1: 1-10, Matthew 22: 15-22

+In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The business section of the newspaper has become a lot more interesting in the past month. Of course, articles that would have been front page news only in the business section are now truly on the front page. Articles about failing banks or a possible GM and Chrysler merger don't get relegated to a back section of the paper. Even so, the reporting in the business sections of our country's newspapers has become considerably more reflective and important.

I was surprised to find the Rev. Andrew Hamersley, the Episcopal priest in Westfield, N.J., quoted in the business section of the New York Times. You won't find us quoted there very often --- maybe never. Hamersley was afraid to open the mail and look at his investment portfolio. In that, he was just like everyone else who has some modest investments. But he went on to say he was concerned about his parishioners. They were anxious. Some had lost jobs.

M.P. Dunleavy who wrote the article interviewed a podiatrist, a couple who took early retirement to open a pottery shop and a school principal. Nobody was feeling very secure. Dunleavy concluded by saying that humans are irrational economic agents. Who can argue with that? He did have this commonsense advice.

1. Ignore fear. In other words get on top of the irrational emotions.
2. Live within your means. Sounds right, but not always easy.
3. Become a better steward of your money. The Bible has something to say about that.

And that brings us to the Gospel reading for today. We all know this story. Jesus' opponents butter him up in order to trap him with a trick question. "You are sincere. You teach the way of God. You show deference to no one. You show no partiality." Then the question, "Tell us then, what you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

This is a loaded question. A definite answer could get Jesus in trouble with the Romans on the one hand or damage his reputation with his own oppressed people on the other. There are layers of complications in this one question revealing the complex, tense relationship that existed between the imperial power and a dominated people.

One could say Jesus' answer is evasive. But obviously those who heard him understood him. Matthew says, "...they were amazed..." They went away dumbfounded. The famous saying of Jesus, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" has left us reflecting, debating, and examining our conscience for two thousand years. Jesus touched us at a sensitive spot. He opened the question up at a very different level than his opponents ever imagined. Here we are today, still probing for what it means for us.

We're used to rendering to Caesar our taxes. We didn't realize we would end up rendering to Caesar our mortgages and our banks. Suddenly the question of what belongs to Caesar goes right to the core of serious debates within the political culture of our country and always has. Jesus riles us up where we already riled up.

Then, Jesus says, "Render to God the things that are God's." Well, at one important level we can say all things are God's. Yet, it's obvious, even if we are faithful stewards of God's good gifts, we have a lot of control over them.

A British preacher puts the central question of this saying of Jesus in another way that may be of help. "What is of concern to God?"

Well, we know from the teachings of Jesus much of what concerns God. We know we should love one another. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. We hear from Jesus that

God is concerned about our everyday welfare, whether we are fed, sheltered and clothed. He tells us God knows we need these things, even more than the lilies of the field. Jesus teaches that God is concerned about our moral lives, whether we are good and just to one another. And as an extension of that God desires that we care for one another --- especially the vulnerable among us. These are God's concerns. They can be illustrated by hundreds of stories and teachings within the biblical narrative.

The mission of God in this world has a whole lot to do with the concerns of God for this world. And if we are to give to God of our money, time and talent, we too must be concerned with the things of God: Things that give flesh to what it means to love others, the material needs of others, to care for the welfare of the community and to forge a moral, just society. Parish churches struggle mightily to work this out.

In the coming months you, the good people of Christ Church, Detroit, will wrestle prayerfully and conscientiously with this very issue. You will do it as you decide on the priorities of the parish mission. You will do it as you make provision to call the next rector. You will do this as the Vestry ponders how to balance questions of our God-given mission with practical issues around pledges and endowment. You will do it in the context of your own homes as you work out how the mission of God is expressed in your daily budget and your daily choices.

We will all have to do what M.P. Dunleavy wrote in his N.Y. Times article. We will have to ignore our fears and trust in God. We'll put pencil to paper, live within our means and still be generous. And we will be good, faithful stewards of what we have. It's what it means to render to God what is God's. Jesus left us with inexhaustible layers of answers to the question of we give to God what belongs to God. He meant for us to live the question day in and day out.