29th Sunday of the Year

There is no getting away from it, in today’s gospel Jesus is crafty. Somehow that doesn’t seem quite the right thing to say about Our Lord, but there it is. And this is not the only time we see this in the gospel. After all, when Jesus sends out the disciples as he says ‘as sheep among wolves’ he does tell them to be as wise or cunning as serpents and as innocent or harmless as doves. We see this again in the trial before Caiaphas or in the story of the woman taken in adultery, when Jesus knowing that someone is trying to trick him, sidesteps.

The gospel writer tells us this, that Jesus knew they were trying to trick them – possibly because the Herodians and the Pharisees came together to ask him their question and generally speaking there was little they ever agreed on. They ask ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not’. In itself, it might be a reasonable question with moral, political and religious implications. Jesus responds to them head on and calls them hypocrites. They are presumably trying to get him to reply in a way that will cause trouble for him or at the very least can be misrepresented. If he says ‘yes, pay the tax’ that will mean that people will see him as siding with the hated Roman occupiers. If he says ‘no, don’t pay the tax’, he will potentially be guilty of inciting insurrection.

Jesus asks for a coin – something that would be used to pay the temple tax. This is his first crafty response. Those who have come to trick him produce a coin with Caesar’s head on it. The fact that they were so easily able to produce one shows that at least in part they are colluding with the Roman occupiers and that at least theoretically they are guilty of breaking the Jewish law as that would be possessing a graven image. Having asked whose image is on the coin and being told Caesar’s, Jesus makes the well-known reply, ‘render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s’. there is a subtlety here. Caesar was himself made in the image of God as we all are. So Caesar too was a child of God and in a sense belonged to God. I imagine that Jesus would have liked to have honest and open discussion with those who had come to try to trick him, but that because of their attitude, this just wasn’t possible.

There is no doubt that the Herodians and the Pharisees are trying to manipulate Jesus into saying something that would cause trouble. Nowadays we are familiar with the concept of ‘fake news’ and the manipulation of stories. You probably all know the (probably) apocryphal story of the senior cleric who was asked by a reporter what he thought of the local gay night clubs. The cleric responded that he had never been to them. The resulting headline - ‘archbishop denies visiting gay night club’. True in a way, but totally misrepresenting what had been said to give readers a very different impression of the archbishop and his behaviour.

As Christians we are called to the truth and to be people of truthfulness. We have a conviction that the truth is revealed through Jesus Christ and that that must impact on the way we live. Paul recognised the impact of faith in Jesus on the way in which the Thessalonians were living – the Thessalonians had changed their lives to demonstrate their new found faith to such an extent that others were commenting on it. One message we should perhaps take from today’s readings is to think about the difference that our faith makes in our life. Another, that we should be truth searchers and be aware when others are trying to manipulate us

So how does this all link together. As a child I was always told to tell the truth, but not necessarily all of it! I think that meant that if I overheard my aunt saying something negative about my gran, truth telling did not require that I immediately went to my gran and repeat it. Later in life this came to mean that I had to think carefully about how to respond to questions such as ‘do you like my hair cut?’!

This reading is sometimes represented as making a distinction between politics and faith – there is God’s world and there is Caesar’s world. As a result, those of God’s world should steer clear of Caesar’s world. To me the exact opposite is true. As Christians we are meant to be out there in the world, seeking truth and demonstrating a set of values that is inspired by our faith. There is God’s true way, and a human way, in which everything is viewed through the prism of wealth and status. We, all of us, to varying degrees are taken in by the Caesars of our own times, the wealthy, the famous, the important and in doing so we lose sight of those who apparently do not count; the man sitting outside the co-op asking for change, the boy racer who zooms dangerously past in his car ignoring any speed limits, the people drunk or high in the street, the small children swearing at us with words which they should be too young to know – and their parents. All these people beautifully made in the image of God. As Christians part of our role is to build the ‘polis’ the community where all God’s children can live in happiness and with dignity until the coming of the kingdom.

Our role then? We are called to be wise or cunning in the service of the kingdom and in the pursuit of truth. The ways do not justify the means, but we are expected to use our God given intelligence in identifying when we might be being used, deceived or manipulated. We have a responsibility to look past the trappings of importance and finery to see that all are beloved children of God and to act accordingly so that others might see Christ in our way of living as their neighbours saw it in the Thessalonians.