

Sunday 22 October 2023 – 20 after Trinity

1 Thessalonians 1.1-10

Matthew 22.15-22

I wonder if you have ever thought about the possibility of this country being invaded, as it nearly was in 1940. What would you do? How would you behave? This summer Alison and I visited the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, which is near to the beautiful Polish city of Krakow. It was an exhausting day, both physically and emotionally, and also brought to my mind those questions of what I would have done and how I would have behaved under an occupying foreign government.

It may surprise you to hear that this is exactly what occurred in Germany itself in 1933. Recently I read a book called “Defying Hitler” written about 20 years ago by a well-known German writer called Sebastian Haffner, who managed to escape to the UK in 1939. He describes in graphic detail what went on in his mind and in his life, as he and others struggled with a completely new situation in their country and the methods the Nazis used to bring about a totalitarian regime. After helping others to make arrangements to leave, he himself decided he had no option but to do the same, because he felt his conscience was being utterly compromised. It was a real internal struggle for him to leave behind everything he had known and cherished – his family, friends, career, and his future.

So it would be for us, I guess. Once again I thought about what I would do and how I would behave if we were confronted by a similar situation. Would I rebel and risk losing everything, including potentially my life, or would I knuckle under and hope it would all disappear and normality would return. I think it would most probably be the latter in my case, although you never know until you are confronted.

This brings me to the Gospel reading for today. Something very similar is going on here. Palestine is being governed by an occupying power, the Roman Empire, which is making life extremely difficult for those who live there. This includes paying taxes to the Emperor in Rome, in addition to local taxes levied by the Herodians and taxes to support the running and upkeep of the Jerusalem temple.

This section of Matthew 22 contains a series of discussions with Jewish leaders: the first one – our reading today – concerns the Pharisees; the second the Sadducees; the third and fourth the Pharisees again. Taking them together we are given a

thoroughly negative view of the Jewish leaders. Today's account is about whether Jesus supports people having to contribute to the Roman *census*. This was a tax on agricultural yield and personal property, and probably amounted to one denarius a year. Although the Jewish authorities helped collect the tax, many people resented it and objected on religious grounds. In fact Roman taxation had been a feature of life since way before the birth of Christ, and the resentment led to revolts on several occasions, notably the major revolt of the year 70 CE or AD.

The fact that the coin being shown to Jesus has come from the Pharisees' pockets highlights their hypocrisy; they have no qualms about using pagan money and are even bringing a coin with the Emperor's image and its blasphemous inscription into the precincts of the Temple. Instead of trapping Jesus (which was of course the point of the discussion), the Pharisees themselves are trapped by him. His words have the effect of distancing him from the people who oppose supporting Rome, while at the same time making the point that there are aspects of life which people owe only to God in how they lead their lives. While obedience to God can exist alongside duty to the state, in this case obligation to the former overshadows a duty to the latter. But as the Germans quickly discovered in the 1930s, this is not always the case.

Today we have a different example of this clash, between Israelis and Palestinians, and who knows how that will pan out? In today's Gospel obligations to God and the state can both be met. Weighing up Jesus's remarks we can see it is a question of balancing the demands of one authority against the other, but in the end, for both Christians, Jews and Muslims, no one can serve two masters. It is God who determines what is Caesar's and what is not. All that truly matters is obedience to God. We have to make our own decisions in that light. Important for us, though, in this instance is that instead of trapping Jesus the Pharisees are trapped by him. We hear that when they heard what Jesus had to say, they were amazed; they left him and went away, to prepare for another day, as we know only too well.