

Jesus and Political Activism

Luke 20:20-26

Day 1: Luke 20:20,26 Setting a trap for Jesus

The religious elite keep their eye on Jesus. Since he soundly embarrassed them, they now send agents, incognito, pretending to be in search of spiritual guidance while looking to trap Jesus in some politically volatile pronouncement, so that they can accuse him of political sedition.

One of the major challenges facing the early Church was to account for Jesus' crucifixion. No one expected a crucified Messiah. In the social and political unrest of first-century Palestine, a series of Jewish militants stepped forward to throw out the occupying Roman forces. Whenever one succeeded initially, speculation would swell: "Might this be Messiah, the one through whom God will deliver us?" Eventually, the candidate would be arrested and executed, or would die in battle, and the rebellion ground to a halt. Luke acknowledges the obvious – the Romans did execute Jesus for political insurgency – but this case was different: Jesus is innocent; the charges are bogus, fabricated by deceitful opponents.

What does this text say to us today, who begin from an entirely different premise? For us, crucifixion does not belie Jesus' claim to be Messiah; just the opposite. Luke's defense has proven so effective that we begin from this Gospel's premise: the crucifixion of Jesus establishes his claim to be Messiah, and underscores the malice and deceit of his accusers. So how does this text apply to us? At least two ways. First, the text speaks to the concerns of sincere, practicing Jews (or others) who remain skeptical of Jesus' claim to be Messiah, given that he was rejected by the Jewish leadership of his day. Luke's characterization of that leadership as politically-motivated and conniving can seem offensive, but has support from several ancient sources (the Jewish historian Josephus, the Qumran community of Dead Sea Scroll fame, the intertestamental books of Maccabees), and from our own experiences with corrupt government. Secondly, the real hurdle for contemporary Jews in coming to Jesus is their mistreatment over the centuries by those claiming to be followers of Christ. To follow Jesus is to live as he lived. He was the one who suffered unjustly, not the one who inflicted unjust suffering. So those who persecute Jews on the basis of texts such as this align themselves not with Jesus, but with his persecutors.

Day 2: Luke 20:21-23 Pandering to Jesus' ego

The moles devise two simultaneous strategies to disarm Jesus. For one, they flatter him, in the hopes that he will lower his guard; for the other, they commend precisely those values which could prompt Jesus to make an injudicious

political statement: he speaks what is 'right', he does not favor the important (gives 'face' to no one), he teaches the way of God, and he does so with integrity. The flattery could lead Jesus to suppose that he is among friends; the commendation subtly manipulates him to speak defiantly against powerful political interests. With the trap set, the spies offer the bait: "Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not?"

Combined with yesterday's reading, this text underscores the melancholy of Jesus' ministry. He came to his own, and his own received him not. He came to save, but they had no interest; worse still, they disparaged, deceived, and manipulated him. He came to give his life, and those for whom he came actually conspired in his death. The gloom of lost opportunity hangs over the entire narrative. This reality is sobering: that through blindness, stubbornness or malice, many still lose opportunity today. This account prompts us to celebrate the supernatural knowledge of Jesus ("he saw through their duplicity"), yet we also remember the downside: that he needed such insight to survive the machinations of those whom he came to save. We marvel at the depth of his sympathy and love, that he would come at all, knowing the ingratitude that would greet his life and cause his death. We celebrate the ironic truth of these statements: despite the risk, Jesus did indeed speak what is right, showing no favoritism toward the powerful, and teaching the way of God with integrity.

Day 3: Luke 20:22 Does the Bible allow us to pay tribute to Caesar, or not?

Typically, we blithely read this question within our own context. No one likes to pay taxes to the government. Do we have to? Yes, says Jesus. The entire narrative becomes an exercise in the utterly obvious and pedestrian: Christians should pay taxes. Like, duh!

Okay, that much is obvious, and may be a legitimate interference to draw from this text, but it is not the point of the passage. It is not the question Jesus is asked, nor the issue that he addresses. The subject of this passage is far more serious, profound, even sinister. These undercover agents were, after all, trying to trap Jesus in some politically volatile statement so that they could hand him over to the governor for trial. Not on charges of tax evasion, but on charges of inciting insurrection.

Much like Iraq or Afghanistan, first-century Palestine was an occupied country, ruled by people who worshipped other gods, people whom they considered pagans. In a culture which assumes that gods aid their worshippers, it is humiliating to profess the true and powerful God, while occupied by a foreign superpower which worships a rival deity. Worse, still, is to be required to finance the occupying forces. This is the question in play: should Jews subsidize this foreign, pagan and brutal oppression? Is it lawful – does the Bible even permit

them – to pay tribute to an emperor who claims to be ‘savior’, ‘lord’, and ‘son of God’ (all appellations used by first-century Roman emperors)? Can they be faithful to God, and still pay tribute to this pagan egomaniac? Or must they choose death with God over life with emperor?

Day 4: Luke 20:23-25 Caesar and God

Jesus’ answer is clever, and deeper than we would realize without knowing what a typical first-century coin looked like. The front bore the image of the emperor Tiberius; on the back read the inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus”. As is widely recognized, Jesus riffs off the front of the coin: with the image Tiberius on its face, “give Caesar what belongs to him”. At the same time, he rejects what is on the back of the coin: Jesus, not Tiberius, is son of the divine God; “give God what belongs to him”. So Jesus uses both sides of the coin to make his point: pay tax to Caesar; honor the true son of God.

The slogan, then, is a rebuke to nationalistic zeal, and a call to faith. For those Jews determined to gain national independence, Jesus urges refocus. Politics is secondary; worship is primary. Focus less, he implies, on securing national independence, and more on being people of God. Focus less on opposing the emperor, and more on following the Son. This message is especially germane in an election year: whatever happens on November 6, whether in federal or state elections, can shape the direction of our country. Nonetheless, it pales in significance compared to God, his kingdom, and our response to him.

Day 5: Luke 20:25 “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”

“Religion is the opiate of the masses,” claimed Karl Marx. As it happens, he meant something somewhat different from how he is widely understood today. In his day, anesthetics were not widely available, so opiates played a crucial role in the suppression of pain. His point, then, was that religion often provides sufficient compensation that the economically and politically oppressed do not rebel. Of course, there’s a darker side to the aphorism: the elite promote religion as a mechanism for subjugating the masses. (In passing, it is worth noting that this characterization is in large measure true: elites often do co-opt religion to pacify and manipulate the masses. Thus, the slogan of the French Revolution: “Death to the princes and the priests.”)

Some might even try to use this passage to such effect. “Render unto Caesar what belongs to him”: pay tribute, political independence is inconsequential; “Render unto God what is God’s”: all that matters is that you have freedom to worship and live for God. A manipulative autocrat could indeed exploit such a formulation to preach compliance among his subjects.

But is that what Jesus intends? Unsurprisingly, no. First, Jesus’ statement as

it stands is already courageous: he implicitly rebukes the divine pretensions of the emperor, and rejects the legitimacy of emperor worship. Secondly, he is speaking to the religious leadership of Israel, urging them to prioritize devotion to God, and to renounce political machination. Thirdly, Jesus is speaking in a volatile situation: by this point, Jews had already rioted several times against Roman rule, sometimes resulting in the death of thousands. Jesus was not counseling passivity in the face of abuse even in his own dangerous time; much less would he counsel it in our democratic society.

Day 6: What belongs to Caesar today

Given that Jesus is not counseling passivity, how does his teaching apply today? Of course, Christians are to pay their taxes, but this is not really the point. Rather, the question is, "To what extent, and to what degree, may Christians protest against political powers and the current social order?" Concretely, our country has a long history of political protest movements: the Revolutionary War, the Underground Railway, anti-draft riots during the Civil War, Women's Suffrage, the civil rights movement, Vietnam War protest, abortion protests, Occupy Wall Street; the examples are numerous. Can a Christian legitimately participate in protest movements against the government? If so, for what causes, and to what extent?

This brief incident, occurring under a totalitarian regime millennia ago, will not provide precise answers to our questions. But three observations are germane. First, even under the miseries of totalitarianism, the worship of God is what counts above all, not political freedom or economic prosperity, as desirable as both rightly are. Secondly, the freedoms of a democracy permit a far wider range of engagement options than do repressive dictatorships. Thirdly, while Jesus dismisses payment of a modest tax to a pagan ruler as a relatively minor issue, that should not be generalized to disallow protest over other, more serious abuses, such as apartheid, corruption or violence. Fourthly, any protest must respect other biblical teachings; for instance, one form of evil (such as murder) is not an acceptable remedy to other forms of evil (such as abortion). Of course, the precise application of these principles will require wise reflection, case-by-case, and sincere Christians may differ on practical details. But for all our differences, we rightly share these common convictions: we worship Jesus at all times, and we submit to the government at most times, while reserving the right to protest evil in any of its forms, including forms sanctioned by government.