

Duty to God and the Queen

Lent 1 2008

(Genesis 2 vv 15-17 & 3 vv 1-7, Romans 5 vv 12-19 and Matthew 4 vv 1-11)

Matthew 22 v 21 is one of the best known verses in the Bible and one of the least understood. *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.*

Our human community is based on trust and loyalty. We have to be able to trust one another and trust depends on loyalty. We know we can rely on our families, our friends, our communities, our country and our God. We trust them. We are loyal to them. They respect our loyalty by trusting us.

We also know that all those human relationships are imperfect. People are not always loyal to their families or friends, to their communities or to their country. We cannot always trust our families or friends or the institutions of the state. Only God is completely trustworthy and only He can rightly demand our unqualified loyalty.

Normally we hope that our loyalties are complementary. When a scout promises *On my honour, I promise that I will do my best, to do my duty to God and to the Queen, to help other people and to keep the Scout Law* the assumption is that there will be no conflict between loyalty to God, loyalty to country, loyalty to other people in general and loyalty to the Scout movement. We would, all of us, probably happily make that promise, though those of us who are not scouts would naturally leave out the reference to the Scout Law.

In England our traditions are based on the assumption that this a Christian country with a Christian head of state in which the Law is not incompatible with the Ten Commandments, in which family life is based on the teaching of the Bible and our social institutions are run on broadly Christian principles. We seldom feel the dilemma of choosing whether to obey our Christian conscience or to obey the law of the land, but we do know that, in many countries, Christians actually face persecution and martyrdom for their loyalty to Christ and we admire them for keeping the faith even when it is against the law of the countries in which they live.

Am I right in thinking, however, that this assumption that England is a broadly Christian country is becoming somewhat complacent? Is our Government Christian or secular? Are our laws and social institutions still compatible with the Ten Commandments, general biblical principles and the teaching of the Church? Do we still base our family life on the long exclusive union of a heterosexual couple, respect for parents and a commitment to bringing up children in the fear of the Lord? Think about the Ten Commandments and ask yourself how many of them we really still take seriously? My estimate is about 2 ½.

We can see where there might be conflicts of loyalty. Suppose you know that your brother has broken the law. Do you shop him to the state? Probably not if his law-breaking consists of parking on a double yellow line. What would you do, however, if you knew your brother

were a murderer? Would your answer to that dilemma be different if we still hung murderers? And, suppose you would shop your brother for a serious crime like murder, but not for parking on a double yellow line, where do you draw the line? Would you shop him for fiddling his expenses? Stealing £10? Stealing £10,000. Stealing from an insurance company? Stealing from a pensioner? Divided loyalties. How do you resolve them?

I think the same issue can arise with friends. If you knew that a friend had committed a crime, you would have to decide whether your loyalty to the state outweighed your loyalty to your friend. If it is a serious crime, doing something that is morally wrong like stealing, you might feel that it is your duty to God to hand him over to the state for punishment. Or you might think that being grassed on by a Christian friend and locked up in one of those universities of crime called a prison will make your friend a worse person than he is now and that your duty to God requires you to keep to yourself what you know.

Personally, I would not report a friend or neighbour for a minor transgression of some petty regulation. I strongly dislike these government campaigns which encourage us to shop our neighbours in confidence. They undermine the friendship and trust which ought to be characteristic of neighbourhoods.

There may be conflicts between family and faith. This is why many of the world's religions strongly discourage people from marrying outside the faith community. If your husband or wife is pulling in a different direction from your God, you are potentially torn apart. What should your children be taught about God? What happens if you want to take time out to worship when the rest of the family want to work or play? What happens if you want to give a significant part of the household budget to the church or the temple or the mosque? What happens if you believe that you ought to offer your leisure time and talents doing religious or other good works?

What about conflicts between faith and friends? Suppose you are a Christian who plays for a premiere league football club. The manager decides to reward the team for a good season with a lads' night out, a team building and bonding exercise, involving copious quantities of alcohol, call girls and the sort of shenanigans that will certainly be reported in the tabloid press and possibly lead to prosecution in the criminal courts. Do you go on the outing or do you risk being labelled an outsider, a *Billy no mates*, by refusing? And what if the team train on a Sunday morning when you ought to be in church? What do you decide?

And, of course, there may be conflicts between loyalty to family and friends. Your friends want you to spend the last week of December surfing with them in Sydney. Your parents want you to go "home" to Rochdale to spend Christmas with them. If you do either it is unlikely that you will find time to go to church to celebrate the Birth of the Saviour which is what Christmas is supposed to be all about. What do you do? Where do your loyalties lie? What is your duty?

This last week there has been a very heated debate about the potential for conflict between loyalty to the British state and loyalty to one's faith and to one's community. If people make

a new home for themselves in a new country, it is natural for them to mix with other people who speak the same language and practise the same customs. We British do it when we set up ex pat communities overseas and immigrants to this country naturally tend to do the same thing when they come here. There are inevitably divided loyalties, some harmless, some potentially sinister. My friend Paul, who emigrated to Australia, cheers for England in the ashes tests and the rugby world cup. I have no problem with that as I have no problem with people living in this country, whose parents or grandparents came from the Caribbean or the Indian sub-continent, cheering for national teams from those places. I can even stomach those Scots who, though they live in England, support anyone but England in international sporting contests. Divided loyalties can be more sinister, however, in times of war. We interred people of German origin during the world wars. America interred Japanese Americans. Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites because they were a flourishing immigrant group in Egypt. He said, *Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land. Therefore did they set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens.* Sometimes such suspicion of immigrants has proved justified. Often it has led to the oppression of innocent people. How do you know the difference?

Immigrant communities may become more conscious of their religion than settled communities. They are more aware of their need for God when their position in this world is less secure. They need the community cohesion which religion brings. Some religions, like Judaism, Hinduism and Parseeism, see themselves primarily as the faith of a particular people and feel no need to seek to convert other people to their point of view. Religions like Islam and Christianity, however, believe that they have a worldwide mission. We believe that we have a mission to the whole human race, proclaiming God's Word to men and women, to people of every colour and country. Ultimately, Christians and Moslems cannot be content to live in a religious ghetto. We have to share our vision of God with the world.

The secular state easily accommodates religions like Judaism, given that Jews are content to practise their religion without trying to impose its tenets on everybody else. The secular state must, however, be potentially in conflict with religions like Christianity and Islam which preach religious values as universal and which therefore conflict both with one another and with other religions and with secularism.

We need a bit of history here. In the Old Testament, the head of state is the King, but he rules as God's vice-regent. He is expected to rule by the Torah, God's Law. When he fails to follow Torah, he is rebuked by prophets and priests. In some cases, kings can be deposed on God's instruction. The principles on which the state governs are principles handed down by God and interpreted by His priests and prophets.

In the New Testament, Christians mostly live in states ruled by pagans or in Israel where the Jewish authorities had considerable influence. All of them came under the authority of pagan Rome. There were obviously no *Christian kings, princes or governors* in the time that the New Testament was written. Nevertheless, the New Testament teaches that we should pray for rulers, obey the law and pay our taxes. This was partly a matter of prudence. There

was no point in antagonising the authorities unnecessarily. But it was also a matter of principle. Authority (even pagan authority) is established by God. Without law, human community would be impossible. On the other hand, where the Roman or Jewish authorities tried to prevent Christians from doing their duty to God, Christians were expected to resist passively to the point of martyrdom.

When the Roman Empire and, later, the nations of Europe became Christian, the situation reverted to something like the way things were in the Old Testament. The head of state was regarded as having the authority of God but also as coming under God's authority. This meant that senior churchmen would rebuke kings and emperors whom they deemed to have broken God's Laws. Sometimes the intervention of churchmen restrained monarchs from acts of cruelty or war. Sometimes it led to the establishment of hospitals or schools, Sometimes, though, these interventions were more about protecting the Church's property or legal rights than about advancing the cause of God's Kingdom. Mediaeval churchmen were inevitably corrupted by the tremendous power they wielded and the wealth with which they were entrusted.

Throughout the Middle Ages there were tussles between Church and state for control over the lives of individuals. In this country, the most famous was the business of Thomas Becket. On behalf of religious authority, he stood up to the state authority of Henry II. Henry had Becket killed, but the archbishop came to be regarded as a martyr and his shrine became one of the most popular places of pilgrimage in mediaeval Europe.

Henry VIII effectively ended conflict between Church and state by making himself head of both. Under the Tudors, England became an Anglican nation in which there were no divided loyalties, because loyalty to the state was the same thing as loyalty to the state Church. That is why I could say earlier, *In England our traditions are based on the assumption that this a Christian country with a Christian head of state in which the Law is not incompatible with the Ten Commandments, in which family life is based on the teaching of the Bible and our social institutions are run on broadly Christian principles. We seldom feel the dilemma of choosing whether to obey our Christian conscience or to obey the law of the land.* Of course it was never entirely true. There were always people whose consciences would not allow them to accept the settlements under Henry, Edward, Mary or Elizabeth I. These were burned as heretics or executed as traitors. Under the Stuarts, religious and political differences, divided loyalties, eventually brought about a bloody civil war. After the Restoration of the Monarchy under Charles II, there was much less actual persecution of religious and political dissidents, but, for a century and a half, only members of the Church of England were allowed to be members of parliament, to hold important offices of state or indeed to go to university. There is a very high price to pay for a uniform society in which divided loyalties are not allowed to challenge the authority of the state.

Since about 1800, we have maintained an Anglican establishment, but progressively adopted a policy of toleration towards non-Anglicans. First other protestants, then Roman Catholics, then Jews and then people of other faiths and people of no faith have been admitted to parliament, higher education and virtually all the institutions of state except the monarchy

itself. The Church of England is essentially a tolerant church and it has not been difficult for an Anglican country to pursue a policy of toleration towards non-Anglicans. Until quite recently, we still had a basically Christian country in which minorities of other faiths or no faiths could nevertheless exist happily and take a full part in public life.

Roughly in my life time, there have been three social phenomena which have challenged this situation. One is the advance of secularism. Our government is no longer self-consciously Christian. Indeed it would probably repudiate any suggestion that it was a Christian government. Tony Blair was strongly advised not to speak publicly about his Christian convictions. Our law is slowly drifting away from its moorings in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Gordon Brown says that our laws are based on British values, but what are British values in the C21? My second point is that Christian faith has somehow become unimportant in Britain in the last 50 years. Although, in that period, most people have called themselves Christians, we have acquiesced in the drift away from Christian values in our schools, in marriage and family life, in entertainment and, indeed, in the legislative process. Church attendance has become a minority leisure interest rather than a sacred duty. If the tide of faith is receding, very few of us are prepared to swim against the tide. And then, thirdly, the last fifty years have seen mass immigration of people for whom religion is actually very important. Some of these are Christians and there has been tremendous growth in Pentecostal and Roman Catholic congregations as a result of immigration. Many are Hindus or Sikhs. And many are Moslems and Moslems are a people with a mission. So they present us with more of a problem.

We have, over the last hundred years, accepted conscience as a reason for not conforming to the diktats of the state. We allow conscientious objectors to avoid military service. We allow Sikh motorcyclists not to wear helmets. When shops were generally closed on Sundays, Jewish shop-keepers were allowed to close on Saturdays instead. We respect the rights of doctors and nurses who do not wish to be involved with abortions. We demand that soldiers ordered to commit war crimes disobey their officers. We do not accept *I was only obeying orders* as a defence.

But what now? The state is ever more intrusive, intervening in family life, regulating voluntary organisations, businesses and even social clubs. It is not only a matter of legislating against abuse or corruption. It is a matter of imposing a secular social agenda. On the other hand, we have significant communities within our society who passionately hold beliefs different from the secular consensus. What is to be done, especially as one aspect of the secular consensus is that there are no moral absolutes which ought to be imposed universally? There are bound to be conflicts. People are bound to feel divided loyalties.

For us I think the answer is to be more confident in our Christianity. If we are absolutely committed to Christian values, including tolerance, we know how to react both towards the secular state and towards other faith communities. If we have confidence in Christ, everything we do is determined by His Spirit. We overcome evil with good and we draw our nation and all its diverse people to Him with chords of love.