

Evotional

Date: 6th April 2008 (pm).

Speakers: Neil Durling.

Message title: “The Church is an organized religion with a political agenda.”



Bible passage: Mark 12:13-17: *Too long for this page.*

The message in brief:

It is hard to stay focussed on Jesus and not become wrapped up in organised religion and political agendas. That's just what had happened to the Pharisees and Herodians who try to trap Jesus in the Temple courts (13-14). The Pharisees headed up organised religion and the Herodians were in political cahoots with Rome.

Why are so many put off Church whilst finding Jesus interesting? I rarely meet an atheist these days; most people believe there is “something up there”, but they don't go to church. So much energy is being put into *Emerging Church* in the hope that new ways of doing and being Church will draw people in who don't already come. Also, a huge number of people complete the Alpha Course but don't become part of a church. Below are some reasons people cite (with varying degrees of validity) for seeing Church as an organised religion with a political agenda:

1. I can relate to God without all of the unnatural structure the organised church would impose on me.
2. The church is about hierarchy, power, and control with a political agenda.
3. The church is made of leaders who function like CEOs and desire power and control.

Mark tells us that the Pharisees and Herodians “...were amazed” (17) after their attempt to trap Jesus. Luke says they were astonished and silent.

So why were they trying to trap Jesus? At least two reasons:

1. Jesus had been preaching the “kingdom of God” which was both a religious (God) and a political (kingdom) message and was vastly different to what the Pharisees and Herodians were “preaching”.
2. The passage we are looking at takes place on the Tuesday of Holy Week. On the Sunday Jesus made his triumphal entry. At roughly the same time Pilate entered the opposite gate of Jerusalem having come in from his home (Caesarea Maritima, a city about 60 miles west of Jerusalem). There is a potential clash of political powers. On Monday Jesus drove out those buying and selling in Temple Courts because they had made it a “den of robbers.” What is a “den”? It is where you hide after your criminal activities. These religious leaders had made this place of prayer (the Temple) into a den where they hid after carrying out their religiously organised activities.

The Pharisees and Herodians question Jesus: “Should we pay taxes to Caesar?” (14-15). Marcus Borg comments: “It is a volatile question.” It's volatile because they had been under the control of the Roman Empire since 63BC. Roman taxation was onerous and also underlined the fact that the Jews had an alien lord. Jesus sees through their hypocrisy (“craftiness” in Luke) and asks why they are trying to trap him (15): If Jesus says *No* he is not supporting Rome. However, if he says *Yes* he risks alienating the crowds.

Jesus is brilliant here. He catches them out by asking for a denarius (a silver coin worth about a days pay) and then asking them whose inscription is on it. Jesus discredits them before they reply, “Caesar's.” (16) How? *They* brought the denarius to Jesus. There were two types of coins in Israel: Jewish coins that had no graven images on them (animal or human) and Roman coins which had the emperor's face on them and an inscription claiming that Caesar was divine and the Son of God. Many Jews would not carry Roman coins for this very reason; they felt they would be dishonouring God. But these leaders do have a Roman coin... Ouch!

After discrediting them Jesus says: “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.” (17) Again, brilliant! In effect Jesus says: “It's Caesar's coin, give it back to him.” This is a non-answer; if he'd agreed with paying taxes he would have said *Yes* when asked. Jesus then tells them to give God what belongs to God. For Jesus and many of his contemporaries everything belonged to God. Therefore, nothing belongs to Caesar and he shouldn't get anything, whereas everything belongs to God. **Give everything to God.**

Question: Am I like the crowd (focussed on Jesus) or the religious leaders (religious and political)?

A prayer: Father God, today I give you everything. I re-commit myself to you Amen.