

**ST PETER'S CATHEDRAL
NORTH ADELAIDE
Sunday, 23 October 2005**

SERMON

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“TESTING THE NEWCOMER”

They came to put the newcomer under scrutiny, to test his orthodoxy, his political pedigree, his stance on one or two issues, for they had their concerns, and wanted to hear for themselves.

So they came, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, the testers, the appraisers, clip-boards under their arms, Bic pens poised, and square boxes awaiting the appropriate ticks.

We could read it all as little more than a religious disputation, a theological fancy about which commandment was number 1. Some academic thrust and parry among the theologians, to be included among other matters for disputation in ivory towers, perhaps to be put alongside the well-known debate about how many angels could dance on the point of a needle.

But in fact these were hand grenade questions, loaded with life and death issues, and the politics of a conquered people, of revolution and subversion, that Matthew collects together in this part of his Gospel, including the portion in our Gospel today, about which commandment of the law was the greatest.

It is a section of the testing of Jesus.

There was the question about paying taxes to Caesar, with the exchange that both Matthew and Mark record about the coin and inscription and "rendering unto Caesar" and all that well-known stuff.

So often this passage has been referred to as dealing with the relationship between Church and State, with the reply by Jesus about "rendering unto Caesar, the things that are Caesar's", as justifying the separation of the religious part of life from the secular with its cut and thrust.

Read in its context it is quite the opposite:

Then the 21st century Pharisees went and plotted to trap him in what he said, so they sent their disciples to him, along with President George Bush and members of Congress, and they said: "Good teacher, we know that you are sincere and

teach the ways of God. Tell us, then, is it right to initiate violence to overthrow an oppressive regime?"

This is something of it!

Here is all the pain and passion of a conquered people. Should they accept their conquest, or should they fight? Should they pay their taxes, or use them as a weapon of resistance, knowing that to do so will bring risk and peril to themselves, and to their families?

Here is Rome and Israel in the first century. But here is East Timor and Dili as well. Here is Jerusalem and Gaza. Here is Afghanistan and Baghdad and a hundred other places, where people suffer and struggle and agonise about how to protest and whether to fight.

And so the scribe asks the hard question, about what response is right before God.

Is it the response of the zealot, provoking a fight by withholding tribute, the coin with Caesar's image?

Or is the godly response a passive retreat and accommodation, a waiting, making the best of it, perhaps a religious disengagement from the hard realities of an oppressive world?

And then comes a question about resurrection.

Again, we might say, here is an important question for theological discourse and scholarly volumes!

This question came from the political struggle between two rival groups, the Pharisees and Sadducees.

But beyond that, I have fixed in my mind that much replayed image of one of the Bali bombers, smiling triumphantly when given the death sentence in an Indonesian Court.

And the 21st century Pharisees went and plotted to trap him in what he said, so they sent their disciples to him, along with members of a fundamentalist terrorist cell, and they said: "Good teacher, we know that you teach in accordance with truth and show deference to no one. Tell us, then; is it right for our young men to fight for what we believe by strapping bombs to their chest, knowing that if we die in this way, we will be welcomed to paradise?"

So here is the passion of the zealot willing to die as a martyr.

Here is the agony of the oppressed person who knows that life is cheap, and who wonders whether there is anything more, any vindication for suffering or a life laid down. And so they brought their hard questions about life beyond death, and about those we love, and our relationship with them beyond the grave.

Then comes the question about which commandment is the greatest, the passage set for our Gospel today, in which Jesus enunciates the great imperative of love.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength". Jesus said, "This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

Again, this is not academic joust about the finer points of orthodoxy; this is the response to a hard testing question.

It is not asked in the context of religious warmth. It is not asked in the context of like-minded souls. It is not in context of abstract theological discourse.

This is the blood stained context of a people conquered by a disdainful power, with violence and hatred and the smell of vengeance in the street.

The command to love comes where love is hardest.

So it was in Israel then ... or is it Palestine now, or Baghdad, or Bali?

Into the hard questions of conquest and struggle, and at the end of them all, Matthew has Jesus speak his command to love, to love God and others with all of self.

Where love seems denied by grief or pain: Go and love God there.

When hatred simmers over and threatens to boil: Go and love God there.

Where unjust structures take their captives: Go and love God there.

Where the modern day Caesars make their decisions, and out on the streets where those policies have their effect and sometimes their casualties: Go and love God there.

Where love is denied and might seem beyond finding, make this the place where God's love is expressed.

So they came to Jesus and asked him hard questions.

And in response he spoke that very hard word of love.

The command to love comes where love is hardest.

I begin my ministry in this diocese convinced that we live in a time, when the Church is called to frightening new life beyond itself, to new, and for many, quite radical expressions of love, to vulnerable places, to fragile things, to risky giving without which we will die.

It is a hard time for our Church; yet wonderful!

It is a time when we can be tempted to become defensive. We can go on responding with institutional fear and fences, with defensiveness and denial, propping up the familiar with ever-increasing anxiety, or we can hear once more that commandment to love, knowing that it means not warm security, or the comfort of like minded fellowship but moving into insecure places; risking as love must do; abandoning, as love will; giving life away, as love always must; daring to be the Church.

Lord, give us the freedom of such audacious love!