



God and Caesar, Church and State in Australia in 1999

A sermon preached by Rev. Ann Wansbrough for the Centre for Ministry Eucharist, North Parramatta 11.45 am Friday 15 October 1999.

Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what belongs to God.

-It sounds simple and straightforward. A clever answer to a dangerous riddle. It has become a saying in its own right in the life of the church.

But understanding and living out this saying goes to the very heart of what it means to be Christian and Church in a particular time and place.

It goes to the very heart of how we are to understand both our Christian identity, and the relationship of that identity to our identity as citizens of Australia.

There are at least three different ways in which Christians, in Australia, understand this saying.

Some would say that it means that there are two spheres, church and state, that are separate in the sense that neither should interfere in the other.

They would advocate not only separation of church and state, but religion and politics. They trot out this saying whenever the church challenges the policy of government or political parties. They tell us to go back to our pulpits and stick to religion.

They seem to think that in our day, Caesar is entitled to demand not only tax, but silence.

But how can we be silent, as if God has nothing to say to the state or the political sphere? How can we be both citizens of a democracy, and Christians, if there is no dialogue between religion and politics?

Our discipleship does not stop at the entrance to the voting booth or to Parliament house.

Church and state are certainly separate. The problem comes when that is used to demand that the church be subservient to the state, and treat the church as having less rights or responsibility in the political arena than other institutions of civil society.

Others would say that our nation has roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and that we should seek a state that is based on that tradition. Usually they mean their personal version of the tradition. This is one version of the view that the state should be subservient to the church.

They want their understanding of God to dictate public policy. They are not interested in issues of reality or practicality, but in incorporating a simplistic morality into law.

Underlying this is a yearning for the church to control the state.

But we know from church history that the church is a fallible institution. When it has exercised state power or control over the state, it has been as fallen and sinful as any other form of state power.

Simplistic views of the implications of theology for public policy have, in past ages, savaged people, destroyed cultures, and degenerated into the same power contests as any other form of state. That is why a critical study of church history is crucial if we are to interpret this passage correctly.

The problems are there, whether we think of the Pope's three tiered crown in the distant past, when he vied with emperors for power, or we think of the church in mission in the "New World" or in Australia.

The film "The Mission" was an eloquent warning of the dangers of going down this path.

The third interpretation of the passage would say that there are separate spheres of church and state, but that the state does not have absolute autonomy. All states, all governments, all controlling powers of our world must see themselves as subordinate to God and accountable to God.

The church therefore has a role in addressing and influencing the state, as one institution addressing another, helping it be an accountable and responsible institution.

This viewpoint was expressed in the statement to the nation of the Inaugural assembly of the Uniting Church, in 1977. The statement expresses our identity as a new church, committed to human rights and ecological responsibility. Its final paragraph states:

Finally we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is God, under whose judgment the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church, as an institution within the nation, must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive. We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere - the family of the One God - the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the One who gave His life for others.

Church and state are not identical. But politics and religion must interact. As citizens we have the right, individually and together, to advocate policies that are consistent with our understanding of community and human dignity. Church and state are not totally separate realms. There are significant reasons for adopting this view rather than either of the previous two.

The first reason is theological.

We cannot abandon any sphere of human life as if God has nothing to say about it or ignores it. God's love embraces the whole of human existence, including politics. In the Old Testament, it is not only the prophets, but God, who yearns for a responsible King and nation.

In particular, God does not abandon the poor and marginalised to the machinations of politics, economics and business. The church must not abandon them either. Our role is to speak with them and for them.

That is why, for example, the Executive of the National Council of Churches in June adopted and authorised for publication a statement "A covenant on employment" that is highly critical of current government policy - or lack of policy - to reduce unemployment.

It is why the Board for Social Responsibility has, this year, made one of its major projects the preparation of a critique of the government's proposed amendments to the workplace relations legislation. We have put our views directly to Mr Reith, in a position paper, and have made a submission to the Senate inquiry.

The second reason has to do with the nature of public policy.

The demand that religion and politics be kept separate is based on a misunderstanding of public policy. It assumes that policy questions are primarily technical questions. This is a fallacy. Increasingly the public policy scholars are recognising that the most crucial issues of public policy are questions of values. Technical issues are secondary.

How could the church possibly be silent in debate about values? That is an area we have expertise.

We know the value of human beings, because Christ died for them all.

We know the value of the whole earth with its web of life, because God created it and called it good.

We know that true wealth is not merely money, but all that contributes to human wellbeing.

We know that there below the surface of what we see and hear and feel there is a great battle between the principalities and powers, between good and evil.

We cannot stand aside from that battle. If we do nothing, we side with evil and injustice.

That is not to suggest that we should jump conclusions about good and evil in policy debates. Engaging in the political process requires careful, complex research and analysis as its foundation. Considering how to do it belongs to another day, and probably a different context. The point today is that as Christians and a church, we have something to contribute to the debate and need to sense the urgency of making that contribution.

There is another dimension of the saying that we must explore at this point.

It is easy to argue that the state, the political and bureaucratic apparatus of our democracy is Caesar. I have assumed that in all that I have said so far.

But it is more complex than that. Unlike in Roman times, power is not concentrated in state apparatus alone. Caesar has several dimensions, or appears in several guises.

Yesterday, in the ethics class, we looked at issues of economic ethics surrounding the Ok Tedi mine. It would be overly simplistic, in that situation, to think of the PNG government alone as Caesar.

BHP is one of the major shareholders in Ok Tedi Mining. Its annual turnover from all its dealings are probably higher than PNG's gross domestic product. This corporation's power to influence is therefore very considerable.

There are many international companies whose annual dealings exceed those of most of the nations of the world. In our day, those who control the lives and welfare of others are not only states, but also major corporations.

Such corporations exercise that power politically. They seek to influence policy and legislation in the countries where they have their headquarters and where they invest.

They seek to limit the power of states over them, by encouraging some international trade law and treaties, such as the MAI (multilateral agreement on investment) and the WTO (world trade organisation), while discouraging others, such as environmental controls or business taxes.

Not only states, but also corporations, can be Caesars who need to be reminded that they have no absolute autonomy. Like other NGOs, the church has a responsibility, as well as a right, to challenge the way corporations use their power and the effects they have on the poor and the environment.

And that brings us to the final dimension of Caesar's identity in our day. We are citizens of a democracy.

We may think our power as citizens is limited, but it is considerable, compared to the experience of Christians in most times and places. It is considerable, compared to most people in the world today.

We have the right not only to vote, but to speak, to challenge, to argue, to write and to publish about public policy.

So we also are Caesar. We have the responsibility as citizens to use that power wisely and well. We are accountable to God for our use of our citizenship.

That is why many churches, including the Uniting Church, now put out briefing papers on policy issues at each election.

This is not party political material, but criteria, based on church values, experience and research, against which candidates' proposals can be evaluated.

Our advocacy, in other words, must be addressed to the state, to business and to the electorate, including ourselves.

As the Orthodox have said:

The evangelistic witness will also speak to the structures of this world; its economic, political and social institutions...We must re-learn the patristic lesson that the church is the mouth and voice of the poor and the oppressed in the presence of the powers that be. *"Ecumenical convictions on mission and evangelism" in BRIA I (ed) Go forth in peace: Orthodox perspectives on mission Geneva: WCC 1986 page 78, quoting Confessing Christ today, pages 10 and 13)*

Under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit, may we be faithful to this dimension of the evangelical witness.