

Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

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Responding as those who belong to God

How do you respond when someone has a go at you?

Are you likely to react and hit back?

Malcolm Guite, an English poet was in a hurry to present a lecture.

He was at the photocopier running off some poems when the photocopier jammed. He pulled what he could out of the machine to run to do his talk.

When he came back the woman in charge of the machine pointed an accusing finger "Your poetry is jamming my machine!"

He thought that was such a great line that he borrowed it and wrote her a poem for her to make amends.

It's a great little poem, I'll share it on Facebook later.

What a gracious way to respond.

It's not easy to find ways to respond to criticism or negative reactions.

Today's gospel reading gives us an opportunity to reflect on how we do respond to the difficult things, to complex relationships in the rough and tumble of life.

You could call this a Christian guide to living with complexity in the face of opposition.

This passage is often mistakenly used to talk about the relationship between church and state. It is about much more.

What fascinates me most is how Jesus deals with this situation and what it says to us about how we can respond.

The Pharisees and the Herodians, who are not normally best buddies set a trap for Jesus.

The starting point is malice – they want to catch Jesus out.

It is ironic that they start with words about how sincere and truthful he is.

Then the question: Is it lawful, is it proper, to pay tax to the Emperor?

They are trying to trick him with a complex question made simple as an either/or statement.

If Jesus responded yes to this question – he'd be in trouble with a lot of Jews. The head poll tax was resented as it was imposed by the occupying foreign power.

If Jesus said 'no' he'd be guilty of sedition and would be arrested.

Jesus chooses not to hit back.

He focuses on what is more important.

Jesus asks 'Whose image is on the coin' – the emperor's - so pay tax.

Paying tax is one thing; but giving to God the things that are God's are indeed another.

Everything is God's.

If this is true, then in all things I will seek God's will and see the world as God does.

The image we bear is God's and all things are God's.

Jesus is making the point that we belong to God first and foremost and that decisions we make need to come from the fact that we bear the image of God.

This is what the pharisees and co have already said to him when they have acknowledged his sincerity and truthfulness, showing deference to no one and being impartial.

Jesus is sincere, so can we be.

How do we choose to respond to negativity, criticism or a trap?

How do we find ways to bear the image of God in this world?

I think being sincere and truthful in our relationships and especially with God is a good start.

We belong to God and that awareness needs to shape our decisions and how we respond to others.

We all bear God's image; we are loved by God, so we are to respond to the world with the same compassion, kindness that God gives us.

If we have the confidence to live out of the awareness that we bear God's image and be authentic, truthful and sincere that can be a powerful witness.

People recognise authenticity and truth when they hear it.

In a world that is jaundiced and overwhelmed with weasel words and jargon, authenticity is compelling and attractive.

It has always been so. Think on how people are drawn to figures such as Nelson Mandela, and Jacinda Ardern and Mary McKillop.

To develop the quality of being sincere and authentic is of value and comes from our belonging to God.

And as we respond to Jesus' friendship with us we can respond with a different tune to the negativity that often surrounds us.

Malcolm Guite's poem based on psalm 49 puts it well.

*Where Christ himself is there to welcome you
Then you are home, wherever you may fare.
And Christ will keep your inner compass true*

*Though all the world is rushing everywhere,
This way and that before the winds of fear,
Between false hopes and premature despair.*

*But you can hear a different tune. You hear
The strong song of his wisdom. Open your ears
To hear his parables, although the foolish veer*

*Between their fatuous desires and fears,
With fickle fortunes that they fear to share.
Keep your security in Christ, who hears*

*The slightest murmur of your smallest prayer,
And do not be afraid, but trust in him,
Your heart's in heaven, keep your treasure there.*

*Lections:
Exodus 33.12-33
Psalm 99
Matthew 22.15-22*