

20th Sunday after Trinity – Matthew 22:15-22, Isaiah 45:1-17, Psalm 96 – St Andrew's Church

Last week saw the publication of a report into Christian nationalism in Britain. The research by the thinktank Theos, comes after scenes of crosses being carried aloft at so-called 'Unite the Kingdom' marches led by Tommy Robinson. It found that the people most strongly inclined to see Christianity as part of defending British national identity, were often not regular churchgoers. Within this group, over 80% identified as Christian but only 13% attended church weekly. Less than a third of this group said they prayed regularly. Only half expressed interest in the Bible. The report suggests that, for some, Christianity has become more about protecting a sense of national heritage and identity, particularly in light of anxieties about immigration, than about the practice of Christian faith itself.

By contrast, another group in the survey with high levels of Christian affiliation, were considerably more religiously observant and less hostile to immigration and religious diversity. They comprised of 13% of the respondents.

A parish priest in Luton this week described how some people in his community are up in arms when they hear news of a mosque opening or a church closing. *'Who's going to protect our churches?'* they cry. He reflected *'none of them have offered to come and cut the grass here'* or help tidy up the place or help at the food bank. Meanwhile, he said, Muslim volunteers were rolling up their sleeves and helping his community in his very church. His church's local community project was set up with the Muslim doctor in the surgery next to the church.

It all raises an important question for us as Christians: what does it mean to bear the image of God? Is Christianity simply a badge of identity, something we associate with our country and our traditions, something we feel we need to protect? Or is it a faith that shapes how we live? That places obligations upon us? That shapes how we see

others and engage with the world? There is clearly a difference between claiming Christianity as part of our national identity and allowing Christ to shape the way we live.

The rise of Christian nationalism we are seeing here and elsewhere, and its association with far right political ideology, compels us to reflect on what Christian identity actually means. We need to challenge the idea that Christianity can just be a badge of cultural belonging, detached from worship, fellowship within a Christian community and the costly demands of faith.

In today's gospel, Jesus is asked about Caesar, about taxes and political allegiance. His inquisitors are trying to tease out partiality from him, to suggest he's on one side and not another. They're seeking to entrap him and cause mutiny against him.

In response, Jesus asks for a coin and points to the image stamped upon it. Caesar's image. Then he says, *'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'*.

It's not just a clever one liner. It's not a demarcation of the political realm, that belongs to the Caesars of the world, from the spiritual realm that belongs to God. Jesus refuses to be drawn into his opponents' trap, but with his answer also leaves them with a much deeper question. The coin bears Caesar's image. But what bears the image of God? Answer: the people standing before him do. If the coin can be returned to Caesar, what, then, can be withheld from God? Jesus is not giving Caesar an unrestricted claim over our lives. He is reminding us that our deepest allegiance belongs elsewhere. Caesar may well have a claim upon the coin but God has a claim upon the whole person.

It's an image developed by the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading. God, we are told, calls us by name, creates the darkness and the light and, as we sang in our opening hymn *'calls my heart to be his own'*.

If we bear the image of God, then our lives belong to God. Our politics belong to God. Our fears, our hopes, our loyalties and our convictions must all be brought before God. This is why faith and politics cannot be divorced. It's why a living faith demands more than ticking a box labelled 'Christian' on a form or carrying a cross on a march. What we believe about God and what we learn through knowing Jesus must affect how we treat our neighbours, how we use power, how we respond to poverty, and how we welcome the stranger. The gospel must challenge as well as comfort us.

And this is also why Christianity cannot simply be a badge of national identity. We cannot take the name of Christ and then ignore the way of Christ. And this is why the Church matters. We come to church not because we have got everything right, but because we have not. We come to hear the Scriptures together, to pray together, to confess our sins together, to receive God's grace and to learn again what love demands of us together. We come to worship alongside people who may not think as we do, vote as we do or see the world as we do. We come to discover that our deepest identity is not found in our nationality, our political tribe or our cultural heritage, but in the God whose image we all bear and whose grace we all need.

In Christ, God calls us to something far more radical than any political party's manifesto. We cannot shrink Jesus into our categories of understanding or enlist him to defend our own interests forgetting that He is the One *'through whom all things came into being'*, the 'Potentate of time' (recessional hymn). He calls us to recognise God's image in us and in our neighbours - not only in those who share our faith, our politics or national identity but in those who seem unfamiliar to us, and even those with whom we disagree. He calls us to offer our entire lives to Him and let Him shape our way of being. This is not a calling to be possessed and defended but to be lived in faithfulness and service. Lord God, make us worthy of our calling. Amen.