Sunday, July 2, 1978
THE CHRISTIAN AND PATRIOTISM
Luke 20:21-26

The opponents of Jesus asked him a hard question: “Should we Jews pay taxes to the Romans who occupy and rule us and our country?” In other words, should we support the enemy government? It was not only· a political question, but also a religious question. Is it right for religious Jews who claim God is our ultimate ruler to also support an earthly government and king?

It was a particularly touchy question. They hoped to trap Jesus with his answer. Some of his follov1ers had strong nationalistic hopes and any cooperation with the Romans could be seen as being disloyal to his own people. On the other hand, if Jesus answered, “Do not pay taxes to Rome,” he could land in the hands of Rome on the charge of treason.

The question of how much tax we should pay and to whom it should be paid, and what should be taxed and at what rate, is most of the time a touchy question. It is that even for us who are not occupied by an enemy power. Since tax money is basically used to support and run the government, the question of taxation leads to an even more basic question, “What should be the attitude of the Christian toward government and the nation? What kind of patriotism is appropriate for the Christian?

The answer which Jesus gave to those who asked the question about taxes gives us some guidance in this whole matter; not however on specific tax issues such as Proposition 13 in California, and other similar legislative issues, but on the more basic question of the Christian and our attitude and relationship to government.

Let’s look at the answer Jesus gave and see what its implications are.

1. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s!” There are routine, practical matters that have to be taken care of in this life. In order that life may have some order, in every society there must be some kind of civil and political authority. A certain amount of government is always necessary. Of course, there can be too much government; government can become oppressive. In a similar way our individual lives can become over organized. We can give too much attention to detail and routine.

But overall, as far as government is concerned, Jesus was saying that we are to have a positive attitude toward the order-creating functions of civil government, because in and through such functions, the providence of God is at work preserving essential conditions for human life. Without government, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy and the warning against anarchy because of the unruliness and greed of human beings, is one of the most persistent emphases in all Christian thinking about the state or government in general.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars!” Some order, some government, the organizing of people into nations or states is always necessary. We need referees in our life together; we need police officers, legislatures, courts to settle disputes and much more. We need some way of organizing our life together. Of course, there are some better and some worse ways of putting government together. Reinhold Niebuhr liked to say, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; man’s capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.”

So, when Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” it was his way of saying that loyalty to country, support of the government through taxes, is an ordinary religious responsibility.

In our kind of government, this places a special responsibility on all of us, for in the deepest sense we are the government. We often talk about the government as rt they “, or as if the government is the opposition, but in the United States, we are the governors and the governed. Thus, our system provides channels for the resolution of our conflicts and. it also provides channels for changing the channels. Responsible Christian patriotism for us means working at reforming our institutions through whatever channels are available, exclusive of violence.

It is unfortunate that there is a tendency in this country to look down upon politics as a rather dubious field of activity. To withdraw from politics is to withdraw from an essential area of Christian responsibility. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s!”

In our kind of government, another aspect of or Christian patriotism involves treating all citizens with respect and dignity, particularly those we disagree with. It also means continuing to seek impartial justice for all citizens regardless of how we personally feel about them. God does not expect us to have everyone for personal friends or invite everyone to dinner. God does expect us to do our best to see that everyone has a job so that they can afford a decent dinner.

2. But Jesus said more than “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” he also said, “Render to God the things that are God’s.” And that’s the part we usually forget. Our biggest temptation is to render to Caesar the things that are God’s.

One of the most tempting idols for people in any age is the worship of nation. This was true in Old Testament times and it’s true in every time and place. While the Old Testament prophets worried about the Israelite’s frequent worship of the fertility cults, they worried far more about nation worship and nationalism.

Like the Israelites, we have to be especially careful that we do not make the state or nation our god. Christian patriotism is critical patriotism. For example, it is not Christian patriotism to say like the bumper sticker we used to see so often-America, Love it or Leave it. “It would be Christian patriotism to say, America, Love it and Improve it. Mature love is not blind; neither is mature love of country.

The state or nation can too easily become absolute and the absolute state or nation with its claim to be the source of truth, the determiner of the purposes of society, and the judge of culture is an enemy of Christ in every age. When a nation becomes absolute it must either deny God’s existence or seek to make God over into its own image; it must either seek to destroy the church or domesticate it for its own purposes.

Furthermore, anytime a political movement or nation is convinced that it has the final solution of humanity’s problems and that, if given power, it can put that solution into effect, it has a rationalization for any ruthless and tyrannical shortcuts in order to gain power and maintain power. This very optimism about its social scheme goes with a blindness to its own temptations as a movement to misuse power and to the realities of its own corruption. This is the tragedy of communism, and it was also the tragedy of Watergate.

C.C. Lewis once said, “Of all tyrannies a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busy bodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they· do so with the approval of their own conscience.”

Perhaps the greatest danger of an immature Christian patriotism in this country is that in practice we often find ourselves engaged in the ritual of a kind of third faith, not Christianity or Judaism, but a kind of civil religion which may begin as a common denominator of our historic faiths but becomes in practice a substitute faith. This civil religion is sometimes nationalistic and sometimes chauvinistic and most of the time devoid of the worship of the One God who transcends all national and racial boundaries. It is often a kind of American folk religion with some Christian overtones.

In a recent column, commentator Nicholas Von Hoffman wrote about what he called the “mush god,” which this kind of civil folk religion often worships. He said in part: 19 The mush god has been known to appear to millionaires on golf courses, to politicians at ribbon-cutting ceremonies and to clergy speaking the invocation on national television at either the Democratic or Republican national conventions. The mush god’s presence is felt during brotherhood week and when service clubs meet. The mush god has no particular credo, no tenets of faith, nothing that would make it difficult for believer and nonbeliever alike to lower one’s head... The mush god is the lord of secular ritual, of the necessary but hypocritical forms and formalities that hush the divisive and the derisive. The mush god is a serviceable god whose laws are not chiseled on tablets, but written on sand, amenable to amendment, qualification, and erasure. This is a god who will compromise with you, make allowances, and declare all wars holy, all peaces sacrosanct.

A related danger which is part of an immature Christian patriotism is when we or any of our leaders invoke the name of God as an attempt to use God for our own purpose. On the other hand, when we are completely silent about God, there is a danger that we will fail to remind ourselves that we are under a higher judgment and then we ·and the nation as a whole may lose all sense of the relation between private religion and a transcendent dimension in the light of which the nation and state realize their limits.

The best approach is to continue to emphasize as we do in this country and have it clearly understood that the nation or state is neutral as between the traditional faiths, but at the same time emphasize that it is not a secular state or indifferent to the religious life of the citizens or to the relevance of our religion to its affairs.-

Perhaps better than anyone else, President Abraham Lincoln knew how to do this. Lincoln often expressed elements of Biblical religion, though he did not use the Christian symbols which could be divisive in our pluralistic society. At the same time, it was no “mush god” that he worshipped. Lincoln humbled himself before the sovereignty of God as the Transcendent God of history, as the God of righteousness and mercy. How different Lincoln’s religion was from the worship of an Almighty who is on the side of one nation or cause. His recognition that good and devout people on both sides of the Civil War prayed to the same God and that the will of God was not identical with the purposes of either party or any nation, meant for him that humility and mercy accompanied commitment to the right as God gave him to see the right.

Another danger or temptation of immature and naive Christian patriotism is the tendency to stress the personal character and piety of a candidate without taking into account the forces which support him or her, or the wisdom of the candidate's policies.

The personal character of our leaders in public life and private life is certainly of great importance, but so also is the emphasis that needs to be placed on integrity in the discharge of public responsibilities. The danger appears when the private character or religious habits of a candidate become a front for interests and policies which are not rigorously examined and discussed. We need always to remember that neither personal virtue nor sincere piety are any guarantee of social or political wisdom and leadership. We need also to remember that no human political leader can be our savior.

Only a mature lover of country can see beyond the country's self-interest and beyond the country itself. Few people loved their country more than did the prophets like Amos and Jeremiah. Their quarrels with their nation were lover's quarrels. No one loved God's people the Jews more than Jesus did. His quarrel with his country, with its political and religious leaders was precisely that they were not living up to the ideals, und visions of the prophets, not acting like people chosen to demonstrate and mediate God's love for the whole world.

God grant that we may continue to grow and be mature Christian patriots, mature lovers of country as we again celebrate our country's birth this July. "America, America, God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law." Amen.