

Our Gospel reading this evening from Mark is the last major confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities before Gethsemane. We have read of many confrontations between Jesus and those authorities. Sometimes the Pharisees; sometimes the Sadducees. In Mark 12 we have them both confronting Jesus. Let us start with some historical context and definitions. As you well know both Judea and Samaria were conquered by Rome beginning with Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE. In 40 BCE, Rome appointed Herod the Great as King of the Jews as a client kingdom of the Roman Empire. When Herod the Great died in 4 CE, his client kingdom was divided between two of his sons. Herod Antipas became Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea while Archelaus became Ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. A Tetrarch was the ruler of a region within a larger entity and an Ethnarch was the ruler of a people within a larger entity. Archelaus was deposed by Rome in 6 CE when Rome took over direct rule under the authority of a Roman Governor. The beginning of direct rule triggered a census that was the reason Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem. Pontius Pilate became the 5<sup>th</sup> Roman Governor of Judea in 26 CE.

Now to definitions: the Pharisees which means "the separated ones" were a sect of Judaism characterized by a rigid adherence to the Law. For the Pharisees nothing mattered more than the Law and nothing in the Law was more important than rigid adherence to the Sabbath. You will recall a number of confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees best summarized by the passage in Mark 2: 27: *Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;* If you were in church on Sunday, you may recall my saying that the Pharisees saved Judaism after the destruction of the temple by initiating Rabbinic Judaism which was dependent on the Law but not on the Temple. Pharisees rejected any notion that the Messiah had come, but they were not hostile to the notion of resurrection.

The Sadducees were a sect drawn from Judean high society. The name comes from Zadok, the priest in Solomon's Temple. They were a sect devoted to Temple worship and included most of the priestly cohort including the high priest. They became extinct when the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Both Pharisees and Sadducees together with the supporters of Herod Antipas Ethnarch of Galilee and Perea were threatened by Jesus in two respects. One he threatened their control over religion and the definitions of devotion; and two, he threatened their uneasy peace with the Roman authorities and their holding positions of privilege dependent upon Roman support. That is the context of our passage this evening. Each of them came to trap Jesus.

The first encounter we heard read was the Pharisees and the Herodians. They hoped that Jesus would either side with the paying of taxes to Rome and thus alienating the common people who were flocking to him; or he would oppose paying taxes to Rome and they could report him to Rome as a dangerous rebel to be eliminated. Jesus confounds them from either hope by

going right through the middle, *Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*

The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, so they constructed this elaborate question about the woman marrying 7 brothers in succession. Given how marriage to this woman seemed to be so lethal, one wonders about the stupidity of the last three or four brothers. I have often thought this story could have made an excellent comedy by George Bernard Shaw, sort of a feminist take on Kind Hearts and Coronets. In any event, Jesus refutes the very basis of their question. God is not the God of the dead but the God of the living. I remind you that all of us who are married made our promises to church or state, just until death do us part.

So what meaning do these passages have for us today. Clearly and firstly, we have to live with secular authority. We are subject to laws and regulations from established by government. In Romans 13, St Paul says: *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval...* It is important to remember that Paul was calling for stability because he believed the end times were very near and we should stay as we are until Jesus returns. That is not a very persuasive argument 2000 years later while the second coming is still awaited.

We don't have much of a challenge, thank God, in Canada to reconcile our faith with secular authority, but there are many around the world that do. We need look no further than right across the border. Our fellow Christians in the United States face a major challenge; even what it is to be Christian is causing great division. If Donald Trump, Victor Orban, Binyamin Netanyahu, Recep Erdogan, and Narendra Modi are authorities instituted by God, then God help us all. We should not forget the long and honourable traditions of Christians standing up for mercy and justice in the face of tyrannical governments.

The second half of our reading challenges us to really think through what we mean when we say *We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.* This is where faith is our only recourse. We have a promise that it is not over when it is over. But beyond that we have no details. No one has returned to tell us. But there are some things we know thanks to science. We know that there is not one atom of ourselves that was not created in the big bang some 13.8 billion years ago. Not that those atoms were shaped to look like us then. That began at our conception from the wealth of atoms created at the beginning of time. We know that matter is often transformed, but never destroyed. After that faith takes over. Perhaps the greatest aid to faith in that it is not over when it is over is how close the dead seem to us when we come out from our first acute grief. For me, there are many who don't seem so very far away. Amen