

God, our Companion on the Journey

Life is not always easy; the path is rarely straight or flat. Twists, turns, ups and downs are part of life. Sometimes life can be uncertain, puzzling and even quite scary. It might be concerns about health, safety, jobs, or finances. It can be for ourselves, our family, our friends or our community.

Regardless of what is going on in our lives, we want to be sure that God will be alongside, a companion on our journey.

The people of Israel are continuing on their travel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses has gone into the tent of meeting; a tent pitched well away from the camp. When Moses went into the tent and spoke to the Lord, a pillar of cloud would descend over the tent; the people would bow down, watch and wait. Moses would speak to the Lord face to face.

We heard as Moses expresses concern. He seeks assurance that God will accompany him and the people in their journey and provide guidance. God assures Moses that his presence will go with them, offering comfort and rest. For Moses, it is better to remain in the wilderness with God's presence than to proceed without it.

The promise to be a companion on the journey is not limited to or end with the people following Moses across the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, commends them for their faith, work and love for one another. Paul assures them that they are chosen by God. God continues to be a companion on the journey for the followers in Thessalonica, so much so that news of ministry has reached Paul that, as imitators of Paul and the Lord, they have become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. They had turned from idolatry to serve the living and true God. The power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of God was with the community, guiding and comforting them.

Some of God's guidance for the journey that God promised Moses comes in the words and counsel of Jesus. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (v21) Jesus tells the crowd around him.

It sounds pretty straightforward. Jesus is responding to a question posed by a coalition of the Herodians and the Pharisees. However, that alliance alone should be enough to set off the alarm bells, as the Herodians and Pharisees are strange bedfellows.

Their question was simple enough: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (v17) If Jesus answers no, then he will be taken as an insurrectionist, and the Herodians would be happy to report him to Rome for encouraging treason. If Jesus answers yes, then he risks alienating the Pharisees, who consider entanglement with Rome as unrighteous, and the poor people who are so brutally oppressed by the taxes that are being questioned. Collaboration or treason: these are the horns of the dilemma, and the Pharisees and the Herodians hope to stick Jesus with one or the other.

The question is more than simply about paying taxes, paying the monies owed. It is about what we owe, what is our due to the governing authority, the civil administration. It is about money, time, truth, effort, intellect, support, engagement and allegiance.

So, what does it mean for us to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

To be clear, Jesus is not establishing two kingdoms. And as Jesus already made clear in the Sermon on the Mount, no one can serve two masters. (v6:24) However, we learn that even Jesus pays the taxes when he sends Peter off to get the coin that was needed for Jesus and Peter. (17:24-27)

Participating in community is more than paying taxes; it is also engaging with the civil administration.

We all get to pay taxes – at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, spanning income, consumption, property, and specialized business taxes. Income tax and sales tax being the ones we notice the most.

These taxes are set by those we elect at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. These people will set the taxes that we owe and how that tax money is used.

Grumble as we might about both the taxes and the elections, we do have a say in the outcomes, more say than almost all of those who were listening to Jesus.

The Jewish people in Jesus’ day did not get to select their leadership; Rome installed the governor or king who would bend to their will. The king or governor then did what they could to keep an uneasy peace between Rome and the local people; sometimes through bribery, coercion or force. Not always easy.

In Ontario we have municipal elections in a week. There is also a referendum in Alberta tomorrow, and there are municipal and provincial elections in British Columbia this week and next. Although most of us are not eligible, there are also the mid-term elections in the USA at the beginning of November. All will impact us in some way.

So then, what does it mean for us to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

I suggest that it is our duty to vote in the municipal and school board elections if we are able. I will not suggest who you should vote for; I am sure you are quite capable of assessing the candidates and making your own decision. We can select those candidates whose platforms most closely align with the fundamentals of our Christian beliefs including the second great commandment “to love our neighbour as ourselves.” Loving our neighbour includes not only the poor and the homeless but also those we do not agree with and those who are different from us in any way.

It can be overwhelming to consider the options and make a decision, but remember, as God promised to Moses and promises to us, God is a companion on this journey. We are not alone. God has given us what we need.

Thanks be to God.

Readings: Matthew 22:15-22
Exodus 33:12-23
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10