

Sermon Archive 456

Sunday 22 October, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Matthew 22: 15-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Framing a compliment, they say to him "Teacher, we know that you are sincere".

In Latin, "sin" means "without", and "cere" means wax. So to be sincere literally means to be "without wax". The story is that it came from the world of Roman sculptors and their statues. Apparently, if for whatever reason (tiredness, drunkenness or basic lack of skill) a sculptor made a big hole or sharp chip where there should have been a smooth surface, the imperfection was bogged up with wax. The wax was smoothed over and the fault was hidden - well, it was hidden until later when the wax dried up, crumbled and fell out. "Sincere", originally then, without wax, meant unconcealed, open to view, not prettied up. There was an original sense of "what you see is what you get".

Nowadays, much of that still fits inside what we say when we call someone "sincere". But for the modern ear, it's come to mean a wee bit more. It's come to mean something about conviction, or commitment to principle. Sincerity isn't something that just sits there, being what it is. Sincerity moves the person; it drives the life. It "spirits" the hands and feet. Sincere people are the people who are doing something, because they believe in something. If you are in the room with someone who is sincere, you can feel a motivational force at work in them - and you kind of know that the force is going to be close to unstoppable - because it's committed. And while in some recent social commentary, "philosophical commitment" was dismissively described as "ideology", another way of describing it is "conviction". And maybe when we detect no conviction, or feel the fire has gone out, we choose another way.

I guess one way to explore what we mean by "sincerity" is to look at its opposites. If you're not sincere, then you're using the wax to cover the reality. You're presenting something false. You're also probably lacking the fire to bring you to action (so your actions are going to have an unreliability - perhaps also an irrationality - no anchor in guiding principle). Nor are you probably going to inspire those around you.

The first part of the compliment paid to Jesus, is that he's sincere. And I wonder if this isn't also the thing that's coming through when earlier in Matthew's gospel we hear the crowds describing him as teaching, in contrast to the Pharisees and scribes, "with authority". He's capturing their imagination. He's standing for something. He's found a rock upon which to stand. Call that sincere? Presenting a compliment, the Pharisees do.

The second part of the compliment is that he teaches the way of God with truth. And we do *not*, at this point, join with Pontius Pilate in asking the cynical question "what is truth?" as if truth doesn't really exist. No, we join with many of our brothers and sisters who've reflected in what recently have been called "post-truth days", in looking earnestly *for* the speaking of truth. If you don't speak the truth, it may be because you, somewhat embarrassingly, are stupid. I have in mind the obviously embarrassed shifting in her seat of immunologist and White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator, Dr Deborah Birx, when her president suggested the was scientific support for injecting disinfectant into Covid sufferers.

Then there was the on-going discussion about truth, misinformation and disinformation - misinformation being innocent, and disinformation being malicious - and the "recognition of truth" being an essential building block for a society's new cohesion.

The third part of the compliment to Jesus is that he shows deference to no one, and treats everyone with impartiality. My suspicion is that we, in our country, post-election, will find ourselves working through this issue of impartiality. It's going to present itself to us as new policies roll back old ones about access to medical treatment, and whether increasing the superannuation entitlement age to 67, when some ethnicities and social class groupings have decreased life expectancies. What is "no partiality in a world of privilege and disadvantage"? How does it sit next to what the liberation-theological churches have called "God's preference for the poor"? I offer no guiding thought on this just now. I do predict though that we'll be called to consider all of this over the next few years, while it echoes in our memories "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God" - for that is where the next part of the gospel reading will take us.

Just before the gospel takes us there, we have Jesus' reaction to the three-pronged compliment. While, almost invariably, *I* will receive a compliment with naive gratitude and a slight little "lift of the spirit", Jesus sees it for what, in this instance, it is. He sees it as a trap - laid by those who have no sincerity, no concern for truth, and a huge bias towards some and against others. He sees through the words entirely.

Is he simply doing what anyone could do, who has watched how the words and actions of these people always have lived in different worlds? Or does he possess a special eye for seeing through things? Is there a Christian spiritual gift, perhaps, for spying the truth? Speaking of his recently deceased friend Rev. Kim Bathgate (a follower of the sincere Jesus Christ), the now also late Rev. Ross Miller said "Beware of Bathgate; he spots humbug at 50 paces". And I am inclined to note that wherever Jesus went, humbug tended to be exposed. There is a "seeing through" of things!

The compliments have been, and now have gone. But the tax-paying part is about to begin.

Music for Reflection

Here's the trap they're setting. If he says "yes, pay the tax", he loses respect in the eyes of people who resent having to pay tax to a regime they see as unlawfully occupying their country. But if he says "no, don't pay the tax", then they've got him for sedition - and the Romans can come and get him.

And here's what **he** tricks **them** into doing. When he asks them to show him a coin, and they do, he's sprung them in possession of a graven image of a false god - making them commandment breakers. And showing them - obviously - to be paying taxes themselves to the unpopular Caesar with whose association **they** were hoping to compromise **him**.

But then the real stuff begins - the stuff probing their earlier language about sincerity, truth and non-partiality. He says "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God".

I think what he's doing here is inviting those who have witnessed the hostile questions, to ask "where's this coming from?" Is this questioning a sincere exploring of truth for the sake of God? Or a cynical power play that serves another master altogether? He's probing whether a smaller tax to smaller gods (to Caesar, to the career, to social advantage, to good old-fashioned Mammon) has displaced a larger, more basic loyalty - a loyalty that not only justifies, but dignifies, that anchors and makes coherent - like that thing inside sincerity that gives shape and reason to word and action.

The Pharisees probably don't much want to talk about these sorts of things. We're told that they felt some amazement, then just went away - - - leaving an uncomfortable silence to be filled by those who are either more morally courageous, or perhaps who have yet to notice that their own hostile questions

have been exposed, read, deeply critiqued. And perhaps this critiquing is not an intellectual activity. Maybe it's a more visceral kind of thing that we just recognise when we see it - because writ large upon it, it's got sincerity, and truth, and equal respecting of people.

I read from an article by American Lutheran, Fritz Wendt. Fritz writes:

On July 4, 2016, Delrawn Small, an unarmed African American man, was shot and killed by a police officer, in Brooklyn, NY. One day later, Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old African American father of five, was shot in the chest and back by a police officer outside a convenience store in Baton Rouge, LA. The next day, Philando Castile, a Black man, was shot and killed in his car by a police officer outside St. Paul, MN.

. . . It was then that a quarterback playing for the San Francisco 49ers refused to stand while the National Anthem played. When Colin Kaepernick “took a knee”, his official release explained: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour. . . . There are bodies in the street and people getting . . . away with murder.” Rather than addressing the injustice, a majority of Americans condemned the peaceful protest, telling Kaepernick to “get the hell out” of the country, declaring him unpatriotic and a “traitor to the faith”.

Then came September of 2017, when the President held a rally in Alabama and chastised the players who knelt during the national anthem, calling on NFL owners to fire any player that dared to protest. Soon a wave of unity against Mr. Trump’s remarks swept across the league. Over 200 football players, performers and athletes protested; entire teams knelt or stood arm-in-arm; players, coaches and owners, including the NFL Commissioner, spoke out. Even though Mr. Trump and his surrogates told us repeatedly that those “taking a knee” were out to disrespect the flag or the anthem . . . , Eric Reid, a San Francisco 49ers teammate of Kaepernick, wrote of their initial protest: “We chose to kneel because it’s a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy.”

What did I say? Perhaps the pursuit of understanding what belongs to God is not an intellectual one. Maybe it's the kind of thing that we just recognise when we see it - because upon it, writ large is sincerity, truth, and impartial respecting of all people. It's fed not by the image of Caesar, but of the One in whose image we are made . . . We keep a moment of quiet.

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