

FACE DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

Recently I undertook some overseas travel mainly to spend time with family in the UK as well as Guernsey. 10 flights in 3 ½ weeks saw me becoming very familiar once more with airport procedures and very alert to their various information signs providing advice and direction.

One sign though in particular intrigued me. It was a sign located near the moving walkways, which simply said, *face direction of travel*. Hanging on to various bags, intent on getting to where I needed to be it seemed to me to be rather obvious to be focussing directly on moving towards the end of the walkway and being ready to go quickly off and onwards. Not focussing, I would imagine, might have undesired consequences. How many people I wondered had got into difficulties simply because they were facing the wrong direction and got propelled across the tiled floor when the moving walkway—well—just stopped moving?

If we take this as a metaphor for how we each live our lives how might this speak to our present way of thinking and acting? How may such a metaphor speak to us, as we seek to give focus to, and follow the Christ who walked the highways and byways, for evermore seeking out, and engaging with, *'the last, the least and the lost'*?

The Gospel reading today, I believe, challenges us to face the direction of travel which God calls us to; of truly acknowledging we are made in God's image and therefore our lives and all we are and own are simply on loan to us. In many ways our culture of consumption and acquisition, of private ownership, this is mine not yours, and the individual nature that is a hallmark of westernised living, runs counter cultural to Gospel teaching. I

wonder how our relationship to life on this earth might be radically altered if we place in check the word “possession.”

By this I am speaking of the property we own, our savings and investments, our car, the clothes in our wardrobes, the myriad of gadgets and household belongings. Then there are our “interior possessions”: our acquired skills and professional status, perhaps even our job/ministry titles. How then, if we embrace and follow God, and acknowledge with gratitude all that we have been entrusted with, do we begin to take steps to use our many gifts entrusted to us in his service?

One thing is for sure though how we discern our ministry direction as pilgrims moving along the walkway Christ has modelled for us will require courage and bravery and a massive step forwards in faith.

Before unpacking this further let’s take another look at the passage from Matthew.

Matthew’s account of Jesus and his handling of the trick question posed by the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians is well known and over the years has continued to challenge Christians as to what exactly may be meant by it. Focussed as it appears to be on taxes Jesus’ statement “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s, “not only perplexed his opponents of that time but continues to mystify present day followers.

However in exploring the historical context, these words of Jesus had little to do with taxation or indeed political authority overall. Jews in the first century paid several taxes: tithes to the Temple, customs taxes, and taxes on land. Those out to trip up Jesus were not questioning taxes in general. Their question was more precise: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?"

Caesar, the emperor of Rome, was the head of an imperial domination system. Rome took control of the Jewish homeland in 63 BC and ruled it through client kings (such as Herod and his sons) and Roman governors.

This domination system benefited the elites who created it. Wealth in the ancient world came primarily from farms. Through a combination of taxation and ownership of farm land, the Roman and native privileged of the first century extracted about two-thirds of agricultural production. The farmers who produced it (90% of the population) got the remaining one-third, leaving them with a subsistence (or worse) level of existence.

The tax referred to in this passage was the yearly homage to Rome. The Jews opinions on this tax were very much divided. Whilst on one hand the Temple authorities including the Temple scribes collaborated with Roman rule and approved the taxation, the Jews who supported the resistance against Roman authority soundly rejected it. Such refusal though was comparable to an act of treason.

Many times this passage has been used to discuss and debate the role of Christians within politics. Diverse comments ranging from the church should not get involved in the political arena to the church's mandate to be right there on the pitch boots and all, have, I think, added to the confusion as to what may be the main point of the story

So back to Jesus' response to those out to trip him up; a first look at the question posed would seem that either way he responded would have seen him get into trouble. Being aware of what they were up to though gave Jesus the advantage and his response was firstly to ask his adversaries for a coin, then to ask whose image appeared on the coin they provided.

The image, as we know was Caesar's. His response was to then simply to say give to Caesar what was his. A rather indistinct response for it neither endorsed nor dismissed the legitimacy of Roman rule or political authority in general. Far more profound and relevant though was Jesus' second statement relating to what belongs to God. What belongs to God and what belongs to the Caesars of today is a provocative question and one which we, who profess to be Christians need to give our full attention and focus to.

Firstly for me, to 'give to God what is God's' doesn't mean opting out of the world we live in; of living in some spiritual bubble far away from situations of conflict and disagreement. It means to be right here in the thick of it all while not accepting without question what is happening around us; whether that be issues relating to our city and its people, or wider to include our country as a whole and the world in which we are placed.

Poet, author and human rights campaigner, Victor Hugo wrote in his well known book *Les Miserable* that "To love another person is to see the face of God." Giving what is due to God means seeing the face of God in everyone and indeed everything we encounter.

Much like the man who stopped his bike by me as just a couple of months ago I left church one cold winter Sunday. His desperation was very obvious. He and his family had no power and no money to pay to top up his Glo-bug card and could I help. This was done, but at the same time I couldn't help pondering over what is, more often than not, the collective silence and inaction of churches in general when it comes to addressing, in practical and prophetic ways, increasing inequality and deprivation right on our doorsteps.

Made in the image of God means we are caretakers and stewards of God's world. Such a mandate though requires focussed planning and action for as someone once put it, **"it's very hard to drive a parked car"**.

When planning and then packing for my recent trip I needed to take into account the all important questions- *the why? The where? And the how?*

Firstly the key question, *what was the purpose of the trip?* For me it was to visit and spend time with various family members, this meant thinking first of all of the individual circumstances I would be entering into, how would I contribute to each occasion in ways that were meaningful? And then the practical matter of what I may need to take with me, some small gifts specially chosen for family members.

The where? This meant a fair amount of travelling between London, Somerset, Guernsey and Barcelona therefore a number of bookings needed to be made. The how required taking care of my home I was leaving behind including placing my cats into a cattery to ensure they would be well taken care of in my absence, and then there was the packing and gathering together of all the required travel documents.

Above all when travelling it requires we take only what is absolutely necessary for the journey. There is after all a strict weight limit on what you can board a plane with as well as stringent security measures. This ensures we focus only on what we need rather than what we think we want.

Possessions, I believe, can both enable and disable. They have the potential to help us achieve great things or conversely weigh us down so much we become fixed in one spot.

Having a clear vision and well defined purpose at the core of our being and being ready and willing to respond to such questions as, “Why do we exist?”, “What do we do?” or “What’s most important right now?” is at the heart of this Gospel message of giving with gratitude all that God unconditionally gives to us.

This message I found beautifully expressed in A Pledge for Grateful Living by BR. David Stiendl-Rast, and in concluding I would like to share it with you.

In thanksgiving for life, I pledge
to overcome the illusion of ENTITLEMENT
by reminding myself that everything is a gift
and, thus, to live GRATEFULLY.

In thanksgiving for life, I pledge
to overcome my GREED,
that confuses wants with needs,
by trusting that enough for all our needs is given to us
and to share GENEROUSLY
what I so generously receive.

In thanksgiving for life, I pledge
to overcome APATHY
by waking up to the opportunities
that a given moment offers me
and so to respond CREATIVELY to every situation.

In thanksgiving for life, I pledge
to overcome VIOLENCE
by observing that fighting violence by violence

leads to more violence and death
and, thus, to foster life by acting NON-VIOLENTLY.

In thanksgiving to life, I pledge
to overcome FEAR which is the root of all violence
by looking at whatever I fear as an opportunity
and, thus, COURAGEOUSLY to lay the foundation
for a peaceful future.

Amen.

Chris Frazer

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