

I LOVE IT WHEN THAT HAPPENS ...

Matthew 22:15-22 [MW17-31]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 15 October 2017

[Hold up a Whittaker's Peanut Slab]

Can anybody tell me what this is?

- yes it is a Peanut Slab, specifically a Whittaker's Peanut Slab but it's also more than that
- it is a testimony to the power of traditional stories and also to one kind of modern storyteller ... advertisements

Whittaker's always seem to come up with great ads

- back in the early '90's they had a great one for Peanut Slabs I wonder if any of you can recall it ...

It starred Bruno Lawrence as the driver of a '60's American V8 convertible

- Bruno is cruising quietly along the road, arm on the door sill minding his own business, enjoying the drive in the great outdoors
- along comes this flashy young upstart in a Ferrari with a gorgeous lady in the passenger seat and tries to muscle his way past ...

Anyone remember seeing it???

- never mind, because due to the power of the internet and Youtube I have found the ad, both parts and here it is ...

[A little further along the road we see the shiny red Ferrari and the flashy young upstart pulled up on the side of the road ... out of petrol. Bruno Lawrence comes cruising past, smiles to himself and says ... "I love it when that happens" and has a Whittaker's Peanut Slab to help savour the pleasurable moment. In the second part of the ad we see that Bruno Lawrence and the classic American convertible, get the gorgeous lady; and we see the flashy young upstart, minus Ferrari, head down, trudging along the roadside with a petrol can. Bruno doesn't even give him a lift! Though he does toss the guy a Peanut Slab before blasting off into the sunset.]

"I love it when that happens"

- doesn't something inside you go, "yeah – I'm with that!" fair enough, for once justice is done and seen to be done
- I love it when that happens and break into a smile with Bruno Lawrence

It's a traditional story, a classic

- that goes right back to the hare and the tortoise, David and Goliath and beyond
- we like it when the show-off is brought down and the ordinary bloke comes out on top
- we love it when people like that get what's coming to them

Unfortunately there seem to be many people we come across

- who we think should get their 'come uppance'
but it never happens

I guess that's one reason I really enjoy the incident in our gospel reading

- it really happened, it's not just a story
it's a classic: "I love it when that happens" moment

Have you ever been in the hot seat, put on the spot

- and wanted to be able to do what Jesus does here?
I mean Jesus delivers the ultimate turn around
a neat sidestep followed by a direct hit!

Let's just take a moment to get into the picture

- Jesus has been giving the Pharisees, the supposed experts on all this "God stuff"
a hard time, he's been making them look bad
- naturally they are keen not only to take him down a peg or two
but to get him out of the way
- first up they give Jesus a situation where it seems there is no 'right' answer
what ever he says will put him in trouble with either Jews or Romans

The question about taxes was a real and burning issue – just like today!

- the Pharisees, and indeed most Jews, resented paying tax to a foreign ruler
even worse when this ruler, the Emperor claimed to be divine
- for Jews God was number one, and no human should claim this

You can tell something out of the ordinary is going on here

- the Pharisees seem to have sought the help of Herod's followers
Herod was King of Galilee and owed his power to the Romans
which normally would mean the Pharisees would have nothing to do with them
- however some kind of deal has been struck, an unusual alliance formed

Then there is the crowd

- the crowd which always gathers in anticipation of something dramatic
some of the crowd would have been on the side of the Pharisees
- for them Jesus is the flashy young upstart in the Ferrari
who needs to be cut down to size
- others in the crowd were just ordinary blokes like Bruno Lawrence
who hoped that just once these stuck up, know-it-all Pharisees
would be put in their place
- there would have been some neutral onlookers and some just spoiling for a fight
then there were Jesus' followers who wanted to see him preserve his position
but wondered how he could possibly get out of this tricky situation

The situation was very real, and very dangerous

- if Jesus didn't handle it well, his whole ministry, his whole mission
could be in jeopardy

The Pharisees challenged Jesus:

“Tell us what you think! Should we pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?”

If Jesus said it was unlawful to pay the tax

- he could be reported to the Roman officials as a revolutionary and his arrest would surely follow
- if on the other hand he said the tax should be paid he could lose the respect of many people and perhaps be seen as a Roman collaborator

But, as we know, there are two sides to every coin

- does anyone have a coin they could lend me?
[examine coin, two sides]
- Jesus could have given a valid argument for either side and either argument would have got him into trouble
- so what did Jesus do?

He asked to see a coin

- anything strike you about what happens next?
when Jesus asked to see a coin, the Pharisees had no trouble producing one!
- in view of the way they were trying to trap Jesus this seems just a little hypocritical
- in a way, Jesus has already made his point without saying a word when the Pharisees hand him the coin
- I love it when that happens!

Jesus is able to turn this situation to his purposes

- using being given a coin as a “teachable moment” Jesus says:
“Give the Emperor what belongs to him and give God what belongs to God.”

What a neat answer!

- the issue is not avoided, clear direction is given
those who tried to trap find the tables turned
- I love it when that happens!

And I love it that Jesus’ “teachable moment” is just as valid right now, today

As Christians we affirm that everything in fact belongs to God

- yet Jesus said pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor
the word for “pay” has the inference that taxes are not a gift but a debt
- a debt owed to the Emperor

Jesus may well have gone on to challenge his accusers

- you complain about paying taxes
saying that giving money to the Emperor is against your faith and an insult to God
- yet you gladly receive the benefits the Emperor gives
religious freedom unknown elsewhere in the Roman Empire
your position, your power guaranteed by Roman rule

- therefore you have a debt

So, who is our “Emperor”?

- what debt do we owe our Emperor?
something to do with our life as dwellers in this community?
the benefits we derive as citizens of this good and pleasant land?
- which means we owe our taxes, our loyalty, our community service?

Jesus concluded forcefully: and pay to God what belongs to God

- in a sense challenging his accusers that
although they grudgingly paid the tax to the Roman Emperor
they did not give God what they were supposed to!

Jesus would remind us that all human beings derive many benefits from God’s creation

- things it would be impossible to make or do ourselves
things which are perhaps taken for granted
- we have a debt to God
and although God may not send accounts like the Council or IRD
it is no less important or due!

Perhaps Jesus would remind us of the individual gifts and talents God has given us

- there is a responsibility to acknowledge the One who gives these things
to use them in the service of others
to live and act as God’s people

[hold up coin – then return, with “interest”: Peanut Slab!]

There are two sides: on one side the Emperor, on the other God

- the sides are equal
there is an even probability that when tossed it will land on either side
- considering paying what is owed to the Emperor and what is owed to God
it is possible to have an unbalanced coin
- yet when Jesus held the coin he came down on neither side
which set me thinking and led to writing this reflection titled “On Edge”

[Read “On Edge”]

A final thought:

God doesn’t keep count of how many chocolate bars you eat - or refrain from eating

- God is not particularly against flashy young men in Ferraris
or particularly for middle-aged men in American convertibles
- remember above all you should love it too
because God is particularly for you!

ON EDGE

A group of men stood at a crossroads
trying to work out the way to go
Undecided
they agreed to toss a coin

Just then a man in white approached
Wait he said
don't gamble your life so easily
Well then sir said the men
you tell us which way to go

Give me the coin said the man in white
Placing it flat in the palm of his hand
he held it out
Serve at the court of the emperor
where diligence brings wealth and fame
or acquire a country manor
and live quietly and comfortably

Or he said
Turning the coin in his palm
Look around and see the beauty of the world
know the joy of meeting new people
discover your true talents

But be careful
choosing one way very often
cuts off another
and sometimes there is no going back

But you haven't told us which way to go
the men murmured
threateningly

So he it said the man in white
and tossed the coin
which landed neatly
on its edge

Best of three
one of the men called after him