“Put no trust in rulers, mere mortals. In whom there is no salvation.” (Ps 145.3)

In the rather long run up before last year’s presidential election, there was much talk about this candidate or that candidate. It was a time of passion and high feelings. “Elect this man or that woman and our country will be saved.” But the reality is that there is only one sovereign, only one who has the power to save who commands our absolute loyalty – and that is Jesus Christ. Elected officials have a legitimate role in government and leadership. Paul directs that we “pray for the emperor and obey the law. But they are not the final or absolute word.

Our ancestors tended to sacralize political leadership. The ruler was viewed as God-chosen and God-anointed. The passage from Isaiah depicts such a sanctified leadership. Cyrus is sent by God as a kind of savior for God’s chosen people. This is true even though Cyrus did not know God. But his role was to manifest God’s presence, God’s leadership of his people. So that short of quotation from the Psalmist is to put things in perspective. The political leaders deserve respect in cooperation as long as they act in accordance with the divine will.

The well-known passage on the coin of tribute from Matthew offers a healthy perspective on our relationship with human authority. Of course this was not simply an innocent question raised to Jesus as a teacher. It is in attempt to catch him up and force a choice which will inevitably get Jesus in trouble. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” if he says “no”, then he is in rebellion against Rome and more likely than not his life will be at risk. If he says “yes”, Jesus is perceived as a traitor to his own people in collaborating with occupying force of Rome. Either way he’s in trouble. But Jesus doesn’t fall into the trap. His response is to ask to see the coin of tribute. “Whose image and whose inscription is this?” His interrogators respond, “Caesars”. Jesus responds with a wise statement that avoids the trap. “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Obviously, the issue is not about paying taxes. We live in society with a legitimate secular government. For the common good of all, it requires obedience and cooperation of the citizens. St Paul instructs his people to pray for the emperor and obey the legitimate authorities. But its authority is limited. If it uses its power in an oppressive way, an immoral way, then its authority is compromised. If civil authority directly conflicts with what God requires, God is to be obeyed. This is obviously a delicate matter and requires wisdom and discernment.

This does not justify rebellion but it may indeed justify nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. It is the time when Christian leaders must speak truth to power and cannot count the cost.

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