



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## What is God's

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 18, 2020*

*The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Isaiah 45:1-7; Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

I received this little vignette via Twitter the other day. Imagine it's the year 2072. "What did you study in college?" "I majored in October 10-17, 2020." "That seems really broad. Did you focus on anything within that?"<sup>i</sup> It feels that way right now, doesn't it? It feels as though we are moving through a great deal of emotional geography at a very high rate of speed.

Well, this is the season for political debates and this morning's gospel lesson features the first of three theo-political debates between Jesus and the Pharisees and the Sadducees (with a few Herodians thrown in for good measure). In each of these debates, Jesus amazes, confounds, and ultimately leaves his opponents with absolutely nothing left to say.

Don't you wish you could do the same when you're discussing something of deep importance to you? I've had a reoccurring fantasy that, after I've laid out my carefully reasoned arguments, my listener is struck silent for a moment and can only respond, "Wow. Those are really great points." Perhaps this is why they are called "fantasies."

In today's lesson, it's the Pharisees, joined by the Herodians, who "plot to entrap" Jesus in what would become the last week of his life in Jerusalem. So, just a quick review to meet all the players.

- The Pharisees are generally middle-class teachers and scholars. They believe in a resurrection to a life beyond death. Fundamentally, they believe it is obedience to the law that will maintain Israel's covenant with God.
- The Sadducees (who are sitting out this morning's debate but who feature prominently in the other debates) are priests closely associated with the temple, and are generally from the aristocratic class. They don't believe in a bodily resurrection, and, in the New Testament, they're the primary actors in the plot to have Jesus put to death. Fundamentally, they believe right sacrifice will maintain Israel's covenant with God.
- The Herodians are a sect of Hellenistic Jews who were supporters of Herod and about whom little else is known. They seem to be united with the Pharisees only over the mutual concern they share about the trouble being created by this Jesus of Nazareth.

We know it's a suspicious get together because Jesus is addressed as "teacher," which is always a tip-off in Matthew's gospel that Jesus is being addressed by someone who's not a true disciple. We also know it's a suspicious get together when the Pharisees and Herodians begin the exchange with such over-the-top flattery. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality."

You have to know something is coming after an opening like that! And then they pose their carefully crafted question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" It only sounds like a simple question. The tax was a denarius, the equivalent of a single day's wage for an average laborer. Every adult male was expected to pay it annually as tribute to Rome. But the tax was hard to swallow for first century Jews for a couple of reasons.

- First, it was a constant reminder of the Roman occupation.
- Second, as scholar Ted Blakley points out, "... the tax had to be paid using a Roman denarius which bore the emperor's image and an inscription that attributed divine status to the emperor. Graven images were outlawed by the second Commandment and any claim to divinity by a human being would have been regarded as blasphemous. Possessing such a coin may have even been regarded as idolatry, at least by some of Jesus' contemporaries."<sup>ii</sup>

If Jesus says it would be lawful to pay the tribute to Caesar, he would be siding with Rome and would compromise his standing as a prophet announcing the coming Kingdom of God. But if Jesus says it is not lawful to pay the tribute to Caesar, his opponents could present him to the Roman authorities as a dangerous and subversive leader.

Jesus sidesteps the question. He feels under no particular compulsion to play their game. He asks someone to produce the coin, illustrating he does not possess one and is, therefore, not violating any religious laws. He asks whose head and whose title is on the coin and then he concludes, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God's."

But isn't everything—absolutely every single thing—God's?

St. Bart's Church once had a large endowment. Now we have a small one for an institution our size. A generous endowment would be a wonderful thing for a 102-year-old national historic landmark building located in what is one of the most expensive blocks on the planet with which to maintain such a building. We spent it for all the reasons you spend resources. We were trying to build up the church. We were trying to make certain St. Bart's had a solid position in the City of New York. We were trying to make certain that the Good News of Christ was being proclaimed by word and by deed on Park between 50<sup>th</sup> and 51<sup>st</sup>.

We believed if we built it, they would come.

Now, make no mistake about it. The Episcopal Church won't be receiving any parcels of land in Midtown Manhattan any time soon. This real estate is precious. And, even if we were to be given such a gift of land, we aren't building these kinds of architectural masterpieces on them anymore.

Over time, we developed a different financial model where 50% of the income from the parish comes from various rentals: Inside Park, the restaurant and bar, the gymnasium, the pool, the preschool, the church—almost every square inch of this building has been rented so that we might squeeze income from it. Even the Rector's office was once rented as a film set. You can imagine the havoc a pandemic might wreak on that income.

A couple of years back, a concerned parishioner from a neighboring parish wrote to me to tell me she had read in the *Times* that a fashion show was going to take place at St. Bart's, and she wanted to express her deep disappointment that such a secular event was taking place in such a sacred place. I wrote back and told her that, of course, we didn't *prefer* to rent the building, and I invited her to send a check to the parish so we would no longer need to utilize such creative strategies. Strangely, I'm still waiting for her reply.

To be sure, we've had a couple of misfires with groups that turned out not to be completely compatible with our values. We're not really prudes, but one fashion show memorably featured a good deal of show but very tiny bits of fashion. The Dean of an English cathedral visiting here commiserated with me as he shared his story of how a women's arts group had used his cathedral to display plaster casts made of the artists' breasts. And how members of the cathedral staff went about frantically placing scarfs over all the plaster casts right before a tour group from the local elementary school arrived.

I hope you're laughing at home because you really do have to keep a sense of humor about these things. And I am telling you these stories in part because I know we look like—and sometimes we act like—a parish that doesn't need contributions from all of the people who are part of our community.

Someone shares an idea with me almost every week about how we could maximize or monetize or further squeeze more resources out of this operation. And I listen to every one of them. Yet, the one idea which is almost never offered is to invite more and more of our parishioners to simply and prayerfully reflect on giving more of their resources to the parish. What would it mean to prioritize your giving to St. Bart's this year? How might it change your life?

Now, of course I realize this isn't possible for everyone. It would be hubris to believe the economic downturn facing our country related to the pandemic has not affected our parishioners. We know that simply is not true. Members of our parish have lost work, had incomes reduced, and have faced the deepest kinds of challenges. Still, others of us have been less affected. Some of us may even be in a position to be more generous this year than we were in previous years. A few of us may even be, by the grace of God, in a position to give in ways that would truly be transformational to this faith community.

For too many years we ran fire alarm stewardship campaigns that in essence said, "Please give big and give now or we cannot promise what will happen to our beloved church!" These appeals were not disingenuous. They were born out of real fears and genuine anxieties. But what if we believed, really believed, that all that we have and all that we are comes from God. What if we really believed that the God who has brought us safe thus far will safely lead us home? What a relief it would be to let go of this great anchor of anxiety that constantly pulls at us and keeps us from responding freely to God's compelling call.

What impresses me most over the years are people who have, over the long haul, learned that their giving does not so much change the organizations they give to, but rather, their giving changes them.

Some people ask me, “If I give something to the church, what will I get in return?” Of course, they never ask it in such a crass way, but I understand the question. I do. In universities and art museums, large buildings and new collections bear the names of their benefactors. Generous people receive public recognition for their generosity. In the church, this is rarely true. Very few churches are named after generous families. Most church giving is done in quiet, even secretive ways. We zealously guard the giving history of our members as deeply confidential information.

What you receive when you give generously to the church is intangible. It is that deep, indescribable feeling of having done something unambiguously good. You receive the knowledge that you are participating with past generations and with generations yet to come in keeping our faith tradition vibrant and alive. You receive a warm sense of having helped a wide variety of people find comfort and hope, from folks living on the streets to people who are facing acute emotional and spiritual crises.

You have the blessed assurance that you are assisting the next generation to become familiar with a way of life, a way of being that will introduce them to the Risen Christ and bring to you indescribable riches. We know, don’t we—I certainly know—when I haven’t done all that I could have done. But I also know when I’ve stretched a bit to do all that I can do, and it is, as the Eagles used to sing, “a peaceful, easy feeling.”

I want to invite you to give generously to St. Bart’s, not because we need it—and you know that we do—but because I want you to be transformed by your own giving. I want you to experience the profound joy people have shared with me after they’ve made a life-changing gift to this parish.

Sometimes they’ve given a gift that guarantees their weekly pledge will continue after their death. Other times they’ve given a gift that helps them be assured that not only will this parish be there to see to their burial, but that the parish will be alive to baptize and teach their grandchildren, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and continue to teach the amazing, life-changing principles of the Christian faith to a vast number of people who have thought generally about Christ, but who have never had the privilege of encountering him face-to-face.

- Some people give to St. Bart’s because they want to greet Veronica as they come in the front door, and they appreciate the opportunity to buy books about the Anglican tradition and the Christian faith.
- Some people give because they love the great volume of sacred space they encounter when they enter this extraordinary building, and they want to say “hi” to Corey or Willie or one of the building crew.
- Some people give because they appreciate the extraordinary sacred music that is performed in the context of our worship.
- Some people give because they want to support preaching and teaching that gives them food for the journey.
- Some people love the fact that we house the Crossroads program here on Park Avenue, and there’s a place for someone to get a meal and to use a toilet. I’ve never really thought about marketing our toilet ministry, but have you ever tried to find a public restroom in a ten-block radius around this church? People struggling with mental illness attempt to destroy them on a regular basis, and I won’t try to amaze you with the things that

people have tried to flush down them. But you can still find a restroom to use here because radical hospitality is one of our core values.

And that, by the way, is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual aspect of Anglican theology in general: that the spiritual and heavenly are always mixed in with the physical and the earthly. Our theology is incarnational. It sweats, it questions, it bleeds, it dies, and it rises again.

So, give to God what is God's. Give to God what is God's.

Give to God gifts so as to make your heart glad.

Give to God to transform your life, to transform the Church, to transform the world.

Give to God everything you can. And all that you are.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Steve MacPherson, Twitter, October 5, 2020, 2:55 pm

<sup>ii</sup> *A Lector's Guide and Commentary to the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*, by J. Ted Blakley, St. Mark's Press, Wichita, c. 2010, p. 408