

**Who Knows God Best?**  
**29<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year A**  
**Matthew 22: 15-21**  
**16 October 2011**

The demolition of the Trinity Pacific Presbyterian Church in inner city Christchurch hinders the possibility of making what I think could be one of the most fascinating documentary projects for our home grown film industry – a re-enactment of the Geering heresy trial. For it was here in 1967 that the Presbyterian General Assembly heard charges of false doctrine against the then head of its Knox ministry training school. Conflict generates tension, and tension is what makes any good story work in dramatic terms, which is why I think this church fight would make great viewing.

Religious leaders whose ministry brings them into the public eye need some essential survival skills to deal with potentially unfriendly audiences, such as journalists with an axe to grind. In that respect they have much to learn from politicians who have to deal with hostile gambits disguised as polite enquiries all the time. A common tactic is the loaded question to which there are only no win answers, if you take the question just as it stands. The greatest past master at dodging this kind of ambush was David Lange, who would reply, “What you are really trying to ask me is..., and then you are going to ask me..., and finally you will end up asking me...,” to each of which self generated questions he would give a series of answers that carried the debate to a very different place.

In a way David Lange had not dodged the issue because usually his quick intelligence had seen the Meta issue behind the question, and had travelled to the final end point of this line of enquiry long before his audience. If he had repositioned the thorny and difficult matter under discussion to his advantage then that was his good fortune.

This is the approach Jesus used in this morning’s contestation story with the religious elite, who are out to get him. As usual the question put to him masks much bigger issues. His clever answer engages with both of them at a deep and ultimate level.

How are Christians to make their way through a world in which power is an ambivalent but often unavoidable reality, and in which compromises sometimes have to be made between the ideal and the difficult practical realities? Here Jesus asserts God’s rights, his legitimate claims on his followers over their conduct in the world he made. The Pharisees and the Herodians might have been expected to start from the perspective of what does God expect of us in this situation, but surprisingly they hadn’t. Their question assumes a ground up approach in which the hated Roman occupation with its heavy personal tax burden fills the vision of those thinking about it in

such a way that all their choices are dominated by this limited perspective.

If they had cared to dig deep in their Scriptures they would have found a rich resource for thinking through how God makes his purposes prevail in a world of ruthless power politics and tyrannical militaristic empires. The Jewish people had been conquered and humiliated by the cruellest people the world had ever seen, the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. But they had got their come-uppance from the Persian Empire that appeared out of nowhere, and having got the upper hand proceeded to free the Jewish exiles, and allow them to return home to reconstitute the Jewish nation. So in this morning's first lesson God calls Cyrus, Emperor of Persia, "my anointed...whom I have taken by his right hand...I have called you by your name, conferring a title though you do not know me...Though you do not know me I arm you." Even the great powers become the unwitting pawns of God in his providential plans and unstoppable purposes.

Or the adversaries of Jesus might have cared to take a look at the book Daniel whose apocalyptic story line combines what Edward Oakes calls, "a fusion of extreme tribulation with irrepressible hope." Trying to make sense of the terrible times the Jewish people had passed through under the Greek generals who had been in charge just a generation or two before Jesus the book Daniel concludes that sometimes God allows evil to run its course, so that when it becomes full blown and fully developed God can cut that canker out of the human story.

Before I leave this theme I recall how many of those who took part in the bomb plot against Hitler were practising Christians. It seems that their faith had insulated them against the siren call of National Socialism, with its extreme nationalism, racism, nihilism and pagan love of violence. Our faith ought to give us the sensibility and insight to see through all the false promises of political manipulators.

Today's trick question raises the second and even more interesting issue of why the religious elite disliked Jesus so much, and had so much energy around getting rid of him. I accept Jane William's thesis that he knew God better than they did, and that they knew he did, and that this cut them to the quick because they were the holiness party in the Jewish religion of their day, who claimed to have the inside running on who God was, and what he wanted from his people. Jesus had called them, had trumped them, on the one thing that they really cared about. This made the conflict between them inevitable because with his superiority in debate he had left them nowhere to go but to either follow him or to eliminate him.

Which brings us back to the Geering heresy trial, and the abundant religious contestation that goes on in the church of our day. How are we to make sense of, for instance, the conflict engulfing the Anglican Communion whose presenting symptoms are the gay issue, and the legitimacy of what the Episcopal church is up to, but which is really about the place of the local church vis a vis the universal church? How do we decide where to place ourselves in this contest for the soul of the Anglican Church?

The answer is it seems to me is with the group or the individuals who know God best. Which of the contending parties looks at the issues from the perspective of what does God want in this situation? Which of the persuasive voices appears to have situated themselves in a genuine attempt at holiness, that takes seriously the call of the New Testament for the Christian Church to be a distinct and set apart people? Which of the groups seems to be able to engage with the issues at some theological depth, while avoiding clichés, slogans and empty phrases? If you can locate this section of opinion that is contending for the truth, and then line up behind it, than you will be identified with that part of the Church that will live.