

Thursday in Trinity X

24 August 2017

LTS Chapel

Pretoria, SA

God's Servants and Your Responsibilities

Romans 13:1-7

Psalm 34

Hymn: "O God, My Faithful God"—696 LSB

In Matthew 28, the Lord Jesus says that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. There is no reserve authority outside of that "all." God does have the lion's share of authority. He has it all for He alone is the Creator of all things and the whole universe will finally bow before His judgment. God doesn't have 90% of the authority with the other 10% being meted out to Jacob Zuma, Donald Trump, and all the other presidents and prime ministers, kings and magistrates. No, all authority belongs to Him. It is to the Lord of heaven and earth that those whom He has loaned the authority to govern people and nations will one day have to give account.

Those who are exercising authority in government are doing so Paul tells us as God's servants. They may not recognize it but it is God who has put them in place and it is Him to whom they must one day give account. They may act in arrogance and unbelief but the Lord God has authorized them to govern. C.S. Lewis once said that in the end all people will serve God whether willingly or unwillingly. The question Lewis says is this. Will you serve God as a son who seeks to please his father or will you serve Him as a tool, like the hammer in the hand of carpenter?

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul addresses our text to Christians, "to those loved by God and called to be saints" (1:7). In this passage, the apostle is not speaking to rulers like Caesar but to Christians who live under God's authority exercised by a human leader.

God has put earthly rulers in place for your good. They are here to reward those who do right and punish evil doers. They will and often do fail in their office. But God doesn't command us only to obey just, honest and God-fearing rulers. No we are to respect, honor, and obey the authorities set over us. Caesar was not friendly to Christians. Yet Paul says that he is God's servant who carries the sword to punish those who do evil. He does not wield the sword in vain.

In keeping with the words of Jesus that we are to render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God, we pay taxes and we show respect to our earthly leaders. Rendering unto God the things that belong to Him, we cling to Him in faith. We put our trust in no earthly throne, president or political party. As the old Lutheran hymn puts it "Trust not in rulers they are but mortal; Earth-born they are and soon decay" (797:2 LSB). We obey them in earthly matters but we do not give them our trust, our faith, that is served for the King of Kings who suffered death on the cross for us and was raised again to give us eternal life.

Trusting in Jesus' promises alone, then we rightly honor our rulers by praying for them, respecting them, and paying taxes. We are not to make of them idols or objects of scorn. We see them instead as God's servants for our good. Remember that "good government" is one of the gifts of daily bread that we implore God to give us when we pray the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

Without God's use of the sword in the hands of His servants, human life, liberty, and property would not be saved even for a moment. But as much as these rulers can do to protect our lives and create a space for lives to flourish in this world, they have no authority over the soul. As Luther reminds us they can neither bind it or loose it. Only the One who was crucified as King of the Jews has the words of eternal life. It is only His everlasting kingdom that will not pass away. Our consciences have been cleansed and comforted by His blood alone. Now with consciences free and clean we can serve and obey God in this world submitting to worldly rulers knowing that in doing so we are bowing before God who holds their authority in His hands. We do so as people redeemed by the blood of Christ. Bought with that precious price we belong to Him whose kingdom is not of this world and so our citizenship is in heaven our ultimate homeland. Amen.

-Prof. John T. Pless