

## **There is No Alternative**

**22 October 2017**

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*Exodus 33:12-23*

*1 Thessalonians 1:1-10*

*Matthew 22:15-22*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

Do you remember Tina? She was around in the 1980s and '90s. Her full name was “There is no Alternative” and she was deferred to as a remarkable authority by governments bent on changing the taxation system and in particular the welfare system. Tina, there is no alternative. It’s a mantra that gets trotted out from time to time, especially by governments or those in authority in other contexts as a way of softening us up for something that we might otherwise balk at. The implication is that they have studied the situation so thoroughly that it would be churlish to argue with the solution they propose. There is no alternative, so take your medicine and be thankful that we who are in charge are so wise. There is no alternative - except that there always is. The alternative may not be so comfortable, and it may even lead to some unpleasant outcomes, but there is always an alternative, and it often enshrines a quite different set of values than the official line being promoted.

The Tina mantra and the policies it covered in the '90s paid homage to the gods of economic performance driven by a focus on the individual and individual responsibility, with a strong dose of a belief that hardship is the result of personal failure, so drive down wages and cut benefits to force people to do better. I doubt if I need remind you of the details or the social cost of Tina. Tina has been less quoted recently, but much of our modern world still invites us to check our loyalties about whether or not we go along with the dominant ways of thinking and acting. And we all get caught in our complicity with the way the world is. Fossil fuel and private cars may be doing irreparable damage to the environment, but it simply is not possible for all of us to rely on public transport or bicycles. We abhor plastic wrappings and bags, but it is uphill work avoiding them. So we go along with Tina.

But then, sometimes you get faced with a situation where you are forced to choose sides: are you for us or against us?

I came across an interesting example of this when reading my Daily Office a few days back. For the Old Testament reading, one option was Chronicles, and the other was Maccabees. Neither could be described as my favourite reading. I chose Maccabees. If you don't know the background it goes

like this: On his death Alexander the Great divided his kingdom into four. One of his descendants was Antiochus Epiphanes who controlled Judah among other parts. He aimed to make his territory more homogenous, and imposed Greek things on the Jews. There was some resistance so Antiochus sent in the army to sort them out. In a nasty piece of plotting the Greek army attacked and butchered a group of Jews who declined to fight because it was the Sabbath. Maccabeus and his family said 'Enough is enough', and said, Never mind the Sabbath for the moment, let's fight them. They ran a very successful guerrilla campaign for several years. But the point I want to make is about what they did in the process to their fellow Israelites who had opted for a quiet life and accepted the policy of Antiochus and kept their heads down, as instructed by Tina. Maccabeus and his followers did what the Taliban did to what they deemed disloyal elements in Iran, or what happened to conscientious objectors in NZ during the war. They beat them up or worse. Sometimes keeping your head down is not an option you can maintain.

It is this world of compromise and ultimate loyalty that confronts Jesus as the Pharisees and Herodians come to have another go at him. Strange that these two groups should link forces to have a go at Jesus.

Normally they wouldn't have much time for each other, but necessity makes strange bed-fellows, not just in NZ politics. The Herodians are quite happy to compromise with the occupying Romans and their puppet Herod; the Pharisees wanted a much stricter distinctive Judaism, not as hard-nosed as the Maccabeans, but still determined to preserve Judaism's uniqueness by strict obedience to the Law, which would not include doing business with the Romans if it could be avoided.

So they are both out to get Jesus - where is your ultimate loyalty? Whose side are you on? Choose your side, and whatever side it is, one of us has got you! But Jesus outwits them with a very smart answer. Give the emperor what is his, and God, what is God's. And we all cheer from the sideline - at least I do, until I go back to the compromised life I live and ask what it means here and now to give God what is God's? It is of course, all God's, but that doesn't solve my dilemma. How do I hold fast to the integrity of my ultimate loyalty in a very confusing world?

I need something like what Moses found when called to an impossible task - lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. How can I, like Moses, find the central focus and vision that will keep me on course? Or Paul writing to the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica, commending them because of the kind of people

they have proved to be as examples of what it truly means to be Christian.

The Herodians and Pharisees tried to force Jesus to declare his hand and take sides; then they would know where he stood, and would have a better chance of attacking him. By opting for a larger vision - the purposes of God to create a people whose love and compassion stemmed from the love and compassion of God, Jesus dodged the obvious trap. The Herodians and Pharisees go away. But it is not to leave him alone. If you are not on either of our sides, then you are a threat to both of us, virtually suggesting that neither of our ways is the way of God. Within a few weeks they will be dragging Jesus before the authorities with the accusation among others that he forbids giving taxes to the emperor.

We struggle to be loyal to our ultimate vision of Christ's peace, but in the power of the Spirit, we will prevail. When forced to take sides, it must be for the love of God in Christ for all people. In God's wisdom, when it comes to loving us into loveliness, there is no alternative.