

Church and State

On the 28th of October 312 the joint Roman emperors Constantine and Maxentius fought against each other in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge near the river Tiber. Maxentius died in the battle and Constantine's victory resulted in his becoming sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

It is said that on the evening prior to the battle Constantine had a vision of Christ's cross, and contemporary Christian chroniclers saw the battle as the beginning of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. His vision was interpreted as a promise of victory if the sign of the Chi-Rho, the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek, was painted on his soldiers' shields.

With hindsight Constantine's espousal of Christianity had a momentous effect on the Christian Church. Up to that point Christians had been a somewhat unwelcome challenge to normal society, making them susceptible to persecution and even martyrdom.

Yet from the fourth century the Church became aligned with the state. It became part of the establishment. That had both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand the Church became much more secure and its influence grew. On the other hand it began to lose much of its original radicalism. That is not to say that individual Christians in succeeding centuries have not stood up against secular powers, but at the same time the relationship between Church and State has been a somewhat ambivalent one.

That has been particularly true as far as peace and reconciliation are concerned. Church leaders have frequently not only supported but even taken a direct part in wars. Christians have fought against Christians. Instead of working for peace and reconciliation they have worked instead for victory.

All that is surely a far cry from the Christian Gospel. Our Lord's teaching that we heard just now (Matthew 22.15-22) formed last Sunday's Gospel reading. There is a place for the state, yes, Jesus affirms. We might add that society can only function if there is order and a proper framework. However, Jesus makes it clear that our primary allegiance is to God. That must override any other claims that are made upon us.

How that works out in practice in the face of particular situations is of course the great challenge. There may indeed not be any easy answers. The criteria for both Church and State, however, are quite clear: peace, justice, love. Only by upholding and furthering those requirements can our commitment to God be met. Only then can peace in our world be assured. Of course we have a very long way to go to end conflict. Yet peace and reconciliation must always remain the goal of humanity, for we believe peace and reconciliation to be the will of God.

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