

Sermon Summary
12th after Pentecost
4th September 2011

- The late John O'Neill of Edinburgh University wrote that Romans 13:1-7 had caused more misery than any other passage of Scripture because of the licence that it had given to tyrants.
- Yet, other passages of Scripture appear to say the opposite. The OT never assumes that all governments are just: kings of Israel lose their authority by failing to keep the commandments of God, or backsliding into the worship of other gods. Revelation 12-13 describes the government of Rome as the Anti-Christ. How can we reconcile these very different statements?
- What is even more problematic is that these passages may even refer to the same government. Romans, from the mid 50s AD is written as Nero assumes power, Revelation (I argue written in 68 AD) the end of that regime.
- We can see what happened by looking at the history. Paul writes when Nero comes to power as a great hope for enlightened leadership, John when Nero's rule had collapsed into grandiose, cruel, self-serving tyranny. According to tradition, this government had ironically, given Romans 13, taken the lives of not just Paul, but Peter, and hundreds of other un-named Christians.
- The Greek of Romans is also important: Paul does not write "the ruling powers" making this a general principle, but "this government, the one we now have". Arguably, this was not intended to be an 11th commandment.
- If this teaches us anything, it is that we should not pluck Scriptures out of context and use them as proof-texts. We need to read them against the background in which they were written.
- Proof-texting is implicitly criticised in the Gospels. It is the Devil who proof-texts to tempt Jesus in the wilderness.
- If we are not to fall victim to that kind of debate, we need to know our Scriptures better. Just like Jesus.

4th September 2011