

A question of tax

16 10 11

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself
and our hearts are restless till we find our rest in you;
pour our love into our hearts and draw us to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face.

My text today is from the Matthew's gospel chapter 22 and verse 21, '**Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's**'.

It is great to be back ! it's good to come home, to catch up and to be with you once again. One of the things about coming home is connecting with the familiar and today's passage from which I take my text for the sermon is one of the more familiar quotations from the Bible. It is part of a famous passage in which the Pharisees with their incredibly improbable bed-fellows, the Herodians, are trying to set up Jesus, to catch him out so that they can effectively neutralise him and remove him permanently from the scene. In a word, they are trying to 'rubbish' Jesus.

Don't you love it ? If you want to be really horrible to someone, start off by being nice to them. What hypocrisy ! – hypocrisy coupled with all the irony of those

who say they love the truth being prepared to lie if the end justifies the means. And if it means getting rid of Jesus, then these Pharisees, with their new-found friends, are prepared to do so. So they start off by trying to butter Jesus up in saying some really nice, complimentary things about him and ironically what they say is in fact true though they themselves clearly don't believe it. 'Teacher we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us then what you think.' Sincere, truthful, impartial: tell us what you think – such intoxicating flattery designed to put Jesus off his guard and to expose him to attack.

And the test question is simple enough – 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not ?' A simple yes or no would do but both would be wrong and either sufficient to get Jesus in deep trouble. A 'yes' would make Jesus deeply unpopular with the people who resented paying taxes to the foreign occupiers of their land. A 'no' would make Jesus appear a nationalist who is encouraging civil disobedience and as such a threat to Roman rule. Great question and his enemies think they have trapped Jesus.

But Jesus is Jewish and does not answer their question directly but instead asks a question of his own, the answer to which answers their original question. But to do so, first he needs to see the coin with which the Roman taxes are paid. It's interesting to note Jesus has no money himself! Now the coin in question is not the Jewish shekel with which the people paid the Temple tax but the Roman denarius, the everyday common currency of trade throughout the Empire.

Examining the coin Jesus asks what appears to be an equally innocent question – whose head is on the coin ? And they reply Caesar’s and their recognition of a simple fact allows Jesus to reply with our text today.

The answer amazes his hearers, astonishes them as you like, for it certainly shuts them up and they leave with their tails between their legs, defeated for the present. But there is profound teaching in the text. What is ‘lawful’ is a particularly Jewish concept – what is right according to the Torah – God-given Law. According to Jesus’ understanding of the Law, to pay tax to the secular authority is appropriate. Tax is indeed a necessity if we are to have an effective government. Now what our taxes are used for is another question but all governments at all times – kings, emperors, presidents, prime ministers – all have raised taxes to allow governments to function. We may not like paying tax but it is our duty to do so and Jesus confirms this.

But what is more interesting is the second half of the text today render ‘unto God the things that are God’s’. And my question is what is it that we should be giving back to God ? I am not sure I can precisely answer that for you. If we owe God everything: our life, our being our purpose, then everything we have is his and how we use it should ultimately be for his glory. The parable of the talents really sums it up – using what God gives us wisely in his name. And that is a serious challenge to us all – to work out precisely how to give back to God what we in fact owe him !

So today we have seen a serious challenge to the person and authority of Jesus and that in answering the question, he is posing an equally difficult question for us all to answer: how best are we to render ‘unto God the things that are God’s’ ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Family Eucharist

St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar

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H: Sermon 24: Tax

