

**Either . . . or ?  
Both . . . and**

19 10 14

Almighty and everlasting God,  
increase in us the gift of faith,  
that, forsaking what lies behind  
and reaching out to that which is before,  
we may run the way of your commandments  
and win the crown of everlasting joy.

Our text this morning may be found in Matthew 22 verse 21: which I'm taking from the King James translation of our gospel passage today:

**'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's  
and unto God the things that are God's'**

Politics are not necessarily nice, not necessarily easy, and one thing I've noticed as an adult is how sharp political interviews can be on Radio 4. Gone are the days when respect was the default position. But in today's gospel passage from Matthew, the Pharisees who put a question to Jesus seem dead respectful. **'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.'** At which point, if I were Jesus, I'd start to smell a rat – Pharisees being nice to me in public ? No way ! What are they up to ? What do they want ? And, of course, there is a clue in the fact that these Pharisees – strict Jews – have

turned up in the company of some Herodians, followers of King Herod Antipas who given their politics are hardly on friendly terms with each other. But then we know that my enemy's enemy can be my friend !

So they ask Jesus the question whether it's right or not to pay tax. And Jesus asks to see a coin with which the tax is paid and hence the answer to the question which is our text today. Now I love the question don't you ? Why ? Because it's a trap. 'Yes' or 'No' – both are a bad answer. Say 'yes' and you'd earn the dislike of your fellow Jews who hate paying taxes to the Roman occupation. Say 'no' and you'd end up in jail for stirring up trouble. Jesus' answer is brilliant: instead of an 'either . . . or' answer, he gives us a 'both . . . and' reply. Give to Caesar what properly belongs to Caesar and to God what properly belongs to God. Brilliant or what ?

But this morning, let's move back from this everyday question of paying tax to the more interesting but difficult one of the nature of God that we can find in today's passage from Exodus 33. On the holy mountain, Moses is standing on the brink of a big adventure. He has led the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and now he is preparing to lead them on into the Promised Land. But Moses is conscious that though God knows him by name and that he has found favour with God, he does not truly know God. Therefore, Moses asks to be shown the ways of God and to see the glory of God. But God replies that no one can see the face of God and live but Moses will be privileged from the safety of a convenient cleft in the rock to experience God as he passes by and to catch a glimpse of the back of God as he moves off into the distance.

Here is the paradox for a God-fearing Jew: the presence with them of God who makes his ways known to them but who cannot be seen by them face-to-face. The Jewish covenant with God is an encounter with otherness that totally changes and shapes their lives. An unseen God makes himself known in their lives.

At the heart of a Christian and a Jewish understanding of God is mystery and paradox. So how can we cope with not being able to fully understand him ? Simply by accepting the answer to our questions about the nature of God can be found in how Jesus answers the Pharisees' question about paying tax to Rome: not with an 'either . . . or' answer but with a 'both . . . and' reply. So God is both unknowable and known, both seen and unseen, both our Father and our brother, both our friend and our judge, alongside us yet in heaven.

I hope that helps – not easy but doable.

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

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

*19<sup>th</sup> October, 2014*

