

## How taxing ?

22 10 17

O God, for as much as without you  
we are not able to please you:  
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit  
may in all things direct and rule our hearts.

Our text may be found in today's gospel – Mathew chapter 22 and verse 17:

**'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not ?'**

Two certainties in life: one day we are all going to die; and the other – we will all have to pay tax during our lives. If we live in a well run society, then we will have to pay for the services we enjoy: for example – doctors and nurses, teachers and police, soldiers, sailors and airmen. One of the slogans in the Brexit campaign, quoted again in a newspaper recently by our Home Secretary, Boris Johnson, was just how much money we are going to save if we left the EU. Well, first let's just see how much we have to pay to leave.

Today, Matthew records Jesus being asked a trick question by the Pharisees who hated Jesus' guts and were out to take him out. So they ask him a trick question which is our text today: **'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not ?'** Don't you love it ? If he says 'yes', then he'll lose popular support by those early Jewish Brexiters who didn't want to be part of the Roman Empire. If he says 'no,' then he

could be grassed up to the Roman authorities as a trouble maker, someone who was encouraging Jewish independence from Rome !

Opposition to Jesus had been growing, especially now that he had come to Jerusalem. Pharisees and Sadducees, scribes, priests and followers of King Herod all disliked Jesus from Nazareth, prophet, teacher, healer of the sick, miracle worker, exorcist. And why did they hate him ? Because he was an outsider, not one of them, one who dared to challenge their authority. Jesus was a Jew from Galilee, not a Jew from Judea, and he had the temerity to tell them, mainstream righteous Jews, that how they interpreted the Torah, the Jewish Law, was wrong and that they were misleading the people.

The passages appointed from the gospel according to Matthew's since beginning of this month have all mapped out Jesus' response to that opposition. First, 'the parable of the two sons' (Mat 21 23 - 32): one son who does what his dad wants and works in the family vineyard and one who fails to do so. Then, 'the parable of the vineyard' (Matthew 21 v33 - 46): the failure on the part of the tenants to respect the owner of the land. And then, last week, 'the parable of the wedding feast' (Matthew 22 v1 - 14): the failure to come to the wedding to feast to celebrate the marriage of the King's son. All three were stories Jesus told, coded language, exposing the failure of the religious authorities to do what God wants them to do. And they knew Jesus was criticising them and they were out to get him.

So they try to set him up with a question about taxes but before they ask it, they try to suck up to him, all smarmy like, complimenting Jesus on his independence of thought: '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.' But Jesus is not taken in and he asks to see a coin with which the tax is paid.

Two things here. Jesus has no money of his own: Judas one of the twelve is the keeper of their common purse. Secondly, the coin is not a shekel with which the Temple tax is paid but a Roman denarius, the common coinage of the Roman Empire. And herein lies the strength and subtlety of his reply; 'Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's.'

So yes we should pay European taxes while we're still in the EU and until we leave then it will just be the UK tax. But there is also that which we owe God.

So, this morning, let me end by simply affirming that there is a right way to behave, with responsibility to pay due tax and to tax ourselves by trying to do God's will for us. Will you ? Do you ? Amen !

*Preached at the Eucharist*

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