

In our Gospel reading today we meet with Jesus in the last week of his life in a conversation with representatives of both Jewish and Roman leadership. The Jewish authorities have been plotting Jesus' demise. They are hoping that if they confront Jesus with enough difficult questions in public, he will eventually incriminate himself and they can have him imprisoned or executed. The Pharisees are represented in the reading by a seemingly innocuous group of trainee or disciple Pharisees who hope that using deferential language will help them to disarm and entrap Jesus. They are joined in their quest by some supporters of Herod Antipas the son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee. The Herodians have lost control of Judea a region governed for Rome by Pilate and so the Herodians are wanting to gain favour with other local leaders to increase their local influence. So whilst the Herodians and the Pharisees are at odds on many political and religious issues, they both see Jesus as a threat and work together to try and expand their power bases and close down this man who is a threat to them both.

They ask Jesus: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" While the question itself may be innocent, the authorities know that whichever answer Jesus gives, can be used against him to their advantage. Tax was a big local issue with taxes to the Romans, Herodians and Temple taking a large share of people's incomes. If Jesus answers that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, it might seem disrespectful to people who feel burdened by their tax bills. If Jesus answers that it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar, it can be used against him with the Roman authorities to support their case that he is a revolutionary seeking to overthrow them. Being the Son of God has some advantages ideas wise, so Jesus doesn't fall for their tricks. Instead and to their puzzlement, he asks them for a coin. When he examines it and sees the head of the Roman leader he says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Jesus is not only not giving an indirect answer but rather using the opportunity to speak of matters way beyond their immediate financial concerns. His answer clearly confused them because we are told they left him and went away. Can you imagine the atmosphere as the crowd stamped home to Pharisee and Herodian HQs?

So what about us? Just imagine yourself with a £2 coin or £10 note in your hand, being given the same conundrum to consider today. (Cash, due you remember that?) Our head of state's head appears on our notes and coins; and Queen Elizabeth II is not just our head of state and the head of the Church. Not divine as the Roman Emperors were regarded but nevertheless regarded in law as divinely appointed. So, if faced with Jesus, a coin, and the same question, how might we understand what Jesus has just said?

I think that when Jesus refers to giving what is God's to God, he is pointing us to consider our relationship with the whole of God's creation. We are not just consumers of God's creation but called to act as his stewards in all we do. Our duty as Christians is to show respect, love care and sustainable practices that benefit the greater good. Some of this management is best achieved collectively so paying taxes to legitimate authority to redistribute for a greater good is a reasonable ask. Just as it is reasonable to pay a proper rate for the goods and services we consume. We have financial obligations as citizens and a belief in Jesus Christ does not exempt us from our responsibilities. But, if God is the creator and provider of all; then when we make decisions to consume goods or be part of a society that has for example a public health and education system, our obligations to our government and paying taxes to "Caesar" is our civic duty. However, ensuring that Caesar governs with justice, mercy and respect for all people and creation is part of our Christian duty.

As Christian citizens we are called to consider the greater good and to actively engage in making our society better. The Christian call to speak truth to power often doesn't make us popular (as Jesus was to learn in the most painful way a few days later); but such discourse is as important to the functioning of our society as paying our tax bill. The Church of England, is an established church meaning we as church have a particular relationship with government. Our prayer book written in the 17th century when our church was founded, calls on us to pray for our leaders and to hold them to account. Also, the structure of government since The Reformation means that Bishops as part of the House of Lords sit at the heart of government scrutinizing legislation. I for one am reassured that our religious leaders have some say in shaping and directing of our society and how our taxes to Caesar (the government) are spent.

The encounter between Jesus, the Herodians and the Pharisee's apprentices remind us that on our civic duties we must be mindful of our obligations to serve God. Our implied civic duty in the spending and paying of taxes is symbolised by HM Queen's face on the note and coins. In addition, our Christian duty to one another is also in the form of a face; but not one face, but in the face of every person we meet. Our fundamental duty to each other is to remember that every person is made in God's image deserves respect. Our Gospel today reminds us that we have duties to God, to each other and to the society we live in. In these troubled times, may we exercise that duty with wisdom, respect, and love. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Trinity +19 Yalding Benefice Sermon 18th October 2020. Rev'd Lisa Cornell.