



Psalm 96.1-9
Matthew 22.15-22
18th October 2020

‘Flip the coin and actually God’s on both sides...’

Perhaps like many people I rather think my Grandfather was simply the best sort of grandparent anyone could ever have wished for. He was a constant source of encouragement in my early life, unfailingly courteous and, quite simply, always there.

Early in my adult years, once I had started receiving a monthly pay cheque, we got on to the subject of tax one day. He was quite sure I was paying far too much and at his suggestion later that week I wondered into the local tax office and put my case. I think my opening gambit was a bit unimaginative and went something like: My grandad says I’m paying you too much!

Well, they treated me politely (always a bad sign!), took my details and said they’d get back to me. Sure enough, a few weeks later a brown envelope dropped through the door bearing the initials HMRC. I opened it, only to discover their investigations had revealed I was actually paying too little tax and next month they’d take a few more pounds off that monthly cheque!

I never held it against my grandfather, because even though he was not that good with his money advice, everything else he passed on to me, by way of example, I’ve found to be more precious than gold.

Paying tax is an act of belonging. It’s part of belonging to society.

In a democracy we express our views on what belonging means to us through the ballot box. In Jesus’ day he and his fellow countrymen and women paid taxes but didn’t vote. And this became one of the greatest issues of their time.

The story that every Jewish child would grow up with, taught at

synagogue and celebrated in sacred meals and feasts at home, was one of being a onetime nomadic, wandering people who eventually settled in a Promised Land to call their own. Yet, in truth, ever since Joshua set foot in Canaan, their history had never been very settled. The story was one of invasion and exile and now, in the days of Jesus, it was one of Roman occupation.

With a Roman Governor stationed in Jerusalem and the puppet Jewish king, Herod, ruling in the name of Caesar, this felt like yet another season of national humiliation.

And because religion and land, faith and national identity intermingled so deeply the majority deplored paying taxes whilst a minority, the Zealots, took matters into their own hands constantly planning and plotting against what they saw was an illegal occupation of the country God had given them.

On the Tuesday of Holy Week Jesus walks into the cauldron of this debate.

And, according to Matthew it was quite a day. Tuesday saw Jesus curse the fig tree, answer questions about his authority, tell three parables, teach about resurrection, speak of the greatest commandment, and defend his ideas of Messiahship. On top of all this, there in the Temple the Tuesday before Good Friday, he is ambushed in a confrontation that was to become one of the most famous of his ministry, all about whether or not his listeners should pay taxes to Caesar.

He'll answer that question, one set to trip him up, with a two part sentence, that was as simple as it was profound, a soundbite before its day: *Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's.*

It trips off the tongue, but our task this morning is to ask: what does that really mean?

And so, the trap is set for Tuesday at The Temple.

A strange and uncomfortable alliance has brought together the Pharisees and Herodians. Normally they were daggers drawn; for the Pharisees genuinely begrudged Roman rule whilst the Herodians willingly acquiesced under it because it kept their guy, Herod, in power. So, two old foes find themselves united by a new, common enemy, Jesus.

They begin their assault with smug words of hollow flattery, worthy of any Shakespeare comedy. They praise Jesus so highly that it's obvious this is merely the preamble to a question they thought would be the silver bullet in his downfall.

They were playing a treacherous game of chess and they believed they had come up with a checkmate question: Should they pay taxes to Rome, was it right to give money to the Emperor?

If Jesus says 'yes' they knew his answer would be so unpopular with the crowd he would probably be mobbed there and then. If he says 'no' he would insult the authorities and be arrested on the spot.

So, he responds by asking for a coin. A denarius, which was the very sum of money every Jew had to pay as a Poll Tax to Rome annually.

Like all coinage of the time, a denarius bore a likeness of the Emperor and was encircled by the words: *Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus*.

The Pharisees hand over a coin, which in itself is a shocking event. They were not allowed to carry money because these coins bore the image of a man thought to be a god. In their pocket, handed over in the Temple of all places, the Pharisees were carrying around a graven image traditionally considered to be an object of idolatry.

At this point their plan misfires. Jesus looks at the coin and pointing to the Emperor's head says: Pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.

In doing so, Jesus lives to see Wednesday!

Now, on a first reading such an answer seems to support the idea of a compartmentalised life. A life segregated into watertight boxes.

We go to church on Sundays. Work on Monday to Friday. Family on Saturday.

It's the sort of thinking, perhaps understandably so in a current climate, behind that well-known statement from a one-time Number 10 press secretary saying of his boss: *We don't do God.*

What he meant was: even though my boss is well known for being a Christian, don't worry, he won't bring faith into the Cabinet Room.

Draw a line between what belongs to Caesar and God.

In time that understanding has underpinned the notion that some things in life are sacred whilst others are secular. It fuels the idea that the Church should have nothing to do with Politics. Interesting that when Desmond Tutu hears people say that he says: *I wonder what version of the Bible they are reading.*

And that, actually, is at the heart of Jesus' answer. Because even his original hearers couldn't possibly have taken it as an injunction to separate life in half, living sometimes in the sacred and at other times in the secular.

Such an understanding just didn't compute with a Jewish way of life. Just as it doesn't now, either in Judaism or Islam. Life cannot be subdivided this way. Life and faith are indissoluble.

So, perhaps in the press of a busy Tuesday Jesus' clever answer seems to square a circle. Indeed, we are told: *Taken aback by this reply, they went away and left him alone.*

Yet I wonder when it dawned on them what he'd really said. Were they knocking on each other's houses early Wednesday morning commiserating with one another that they'd been duped? For in the night it came to them, Jesus' answer actually meant it's God who has our total allegiance, never Caesar.

Why was that?

Well, it's all to do with the words Jesus uses. Rendering to Caesar is about merely doing your duty in paying taxes. Every society has a Caesar of some sort and every social economy needs paying for in some sort of taxation.

It's the next part of the answer, though, that went the deepest. Render unto God what belongs to God, isn't about giving up a denarius every year but offering up to God your life every day.

What belongs to God? The Psalmist says: *The world and everything in it.*

So, this was, in fact, a profoundly subversive answer by Jesus and it's inspired Christians down the centuries, like Bonhoeffer in Germany and Oscar Romero in El Salvador who, when conscience demanded took a stand against the State out of a greater loyalty to God.

For us, these words of Jesus are important too. They challenge us to see life as a whole and to shake off that false dichotomy between what sacred and secular.

It's bad grammar, but I think good theology to say: *We DO God!* And not just in church either. Faith infuses all of life.

George Herbert, that young priest come poet in the 1630's, living on the outskirts of Salisbury has one line of a hymn that we still sing today, which goes: *Seven whole days, not one in seven I will praise thee...*

Every part of every day is touched by God not just the one we spend in church on Sundays.

Perhaps we could frame the question asked by the Pharisees and Herodians differently. In essence were they not really asking: Whom do we belong to? To Caesar or to God?

It's a question that challenged every Christian forced, in the first century, to burn incense once a year at the village's Imperial Shrine.

Jesus asked what image was on the coin. He might have asked what image is stamped on every human life?

The idea that we are all made with something of God's image about us defines and inspires us. The way we live, the justice we strive for, the ideals we hold and the ambitions that drive us all ask us to consider the question of not just how we do things, but why?

The why question is so important. Why love mercy and pursue justice? Because God's image is stamped on our hearts. The earth belongs to God and we do too.

There is no real division between the sacred and secular because: The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

I wonder if you tuned into Songs of Praise the other Sunday afternoon which came from Saltaire on the outskirts of Bradford.

This model village was built in the mid 1800's by Sir Titus Salt, who owned the largest mills in Bradford. Rather than overcrowd an already polluted city he consolidated all his mills into one at Saltaire. But he didn't just do that, he built hundreds of houses for his workforce, bathhouses, institutes, hospitals and churches. At the centre of this model town he built a Congregational Chapel, now Saltaire URC church.

Sir Titus Salt never left a written account of why he did all this. But those who watched him were of one mind; he did it because of his Christian principles. For him there was no divide between the church he attended and the mill he built. His faith infused his life with no dichotomy.

As one Australian commentator has put it as he reflects on today's story about that famous denarius: *Flip the coin and God is actually*

on both sides!

May it be so, in the name of our welcoming and inviting God.
Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 25th September 2020