**To pay or not to pay**

*Genesis 1:27, Psalm 96:1-8, Matthew 22:15-22*

*22nd October 2023*

November the 22nd will be a significant day. Whatever else may be happening in our own personal lives, it will also be the date of the Autumn Financial Statement given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He will outline the Government’s future plans on taxation and fiscal policy. This is something that will affect us all. For as Benjamin Franklin observed in 1789, ‘”In this world nothing is certain except death and taxes”. Someone, who agreed with him, added the flippant remark, ‘yes, but you only have to die once, not once a year, every year!’ Well, it maybe that the Franklin quotation is the best remembered one but, as today’s Gospel passage indicates, the question of taxes have been around much longer.

We have heard the story. Jesus is being approached by some Pharisees and members of Herod’s party to question him about whether or not it is permitted to pay taxes to the occupying Roman forces. In case we may be tempted to hear this as an innocent, straightforward flagging up a genuine problem, the Gospel writer already interprets the situation for his readers: it is really a trick question to trap Jesus. And why would they want to do that? Well, it may be helpful to know the context of this exchange. Jesus is no longer in rural Galilee preaching and teaching and healing people. The scene of our story is the Temple in Jerusalem and the time is just after his gloriously disturbing entry into the city resounding with shouts of ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, followed up by his furious cleansing of the Temple precincts. So, he is no longer a mere rumour of a country prophet from somewhere North of Watford as we would say. He is now at a place like Canterbury and London rolled into one and proving to be a force to be reckoned with; a danger to the ruling authorities, both religious and political. And after all this, here he is, back again, in the Temple teaching and keeps talking about the Kingdom of God. In the Temple, just imagine! How daring can you get?

But, doing away with him is not an easy proposition. He seems to be at the height of his popularity and his enemies cannot risk a mass demonstration or even worse, in his support. Hence the innocent sounding questioning, which come after a kind of ‘buttering up’ introduction praising Jesus. “Are we, or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor?” Meaning, how do you understand God’s view on that? As if we were asked: Are you or are you not in favour of reducing taxes in the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement? What is your God’s view on that?

For Jesus it is a typical catch 22 situation. It goes beyond the bounds of seeking a private advice. It is more like playing to the galleries. It is no longer just about the practical matter of parting with your cash. It is the greater question of how to navigate your life between faith and politics. And we cannot have a more burning question than this just now given the dangerous international events unfolding in the Middle East. Whatever Jesus’ answer, he will either be convicted of political sedition or religious blasphemy.

Yet, the way Jesus handles the situation does not seem to accept this polarised view. He calls his questioners hypocrites and asks for a coin that is being used for paying taxes. When it is produced it becomes clear why his attackers are called hypocrites. The word hypocrite means someone acting differently from their real identity. Now, the coin would be a Roman coin bearing not only the image of Caesar, but also his designation as Son of God. By having this coin on them in the Temple, the Pharisees and Herodians have already convicted themselves of acting against the religious laws for it was forbidden to bring these coins into the Temple. Not to mention that it was also forbidden to make images of the divine. So, - we may ask - who are these people daring to question Jesus and wanting to trip him up for breaking the law?

But Jesus does not play to the galleries. His answer doesn’t let either the Pharisees or his own followers to claim the moral high ground. What he does is to make everyone think. He makes them reflect on their own actions and their own motivations behind those actions. And he keeps doing the same with us. He doesn’t give us blow by blow instructions of how to handle individual situations, difficulties, or crises, how to relate to power or government, or wars and terrorism but he gives us some tools for coming to our own conclusions about these things.

He certainly doesn’t forbid the paying of taxes as some of his followers would’ve liked him to do. But neither does he let off the hook those who thought the authority of the Emperor was the only authority to be considered. Yes, you may have to pay to Caesar what belongs to him, as the image on his coin indicates, but you also have to pay to God what belongs to God. And as all observant, religious Jewish person would have known and could probably recite it from Psalm 24:

“*The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,*

*the world and those who live in it;*

*for he has founded it on the seas,*

*and established it on the rivers.”*

Of course, there wasn’t an alternative coin showing God’s image to remind people of the ground on which they stood, because as we just said the Jewish faith was unique in worshipping an ‘invisible’ God, as it were. The second commandment is very clear on making images of the one true God, it is forbidden. However, the interesting thing is that the word used here in the Gospel for image is not the same as referred to in the second commandment, it is the word used in the creation story in Genesis, which we heard in our first reading earlier: *“God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”. (Gen 1:27)*

So, that’s what Jesus is reminding his audience here. What an amazing insight! We cannot make images of God, yet God does not leave us without any visible sign. There is a lovely, heart-warming story one of the Commentators mentions, which he used for a children’s talk in his own church. He was trying to illustrate the point of what God looked like, when no-one had ever seen God. He produced an empty box and told the children if they looked inside they might find out something about what God looked like. There was a lot of guessing as to what might be in the box. Finally, one little boy was called out to look inside the box, which was totally empty except its bottom panel was replaced by a mirror. The little boy seemed to have got the message and in great delight he cried out to his parents the highest accolade he could think of: This is just so cool!’

And so it is. Even awesome! It may be concluded, as someone did, that if anything looks like Caesar it belongs to Caesar and if it looks like God, it belongs to God. And here comes the challenge. Can we turn it round and say, in order to realise that we belong to God, we need to discover and display - at least in some measure - God’s likeness in us, for that is how we were created, that is our true identity. And in a sense, this is the only way we can show anyone who our God is. Jesus, who has fully accepted his true identity as the image of God, has demonstrated how to do it. With everything he said and did he declared that he belonged to God. People took notice of him because they sensed that he was filled with the Spirit of God.

We may not always know which way to turn, when to say ‘yes’ and when to say ‘no’, how to handle a difficult relationship, which way to vote at the next General Election, how to come to terms with life’s inevitable ups and downs and occasional horrors. But, if we follow Jesus’ example and keep remembering, ‘I belong to God’, that will give us a start in unravelling our problems. Unfortunately, sometimes we do this in the wrong way round. We make our decisions as we see fit, we speak and act instinctively and if things don’t work out, *then* we remember and pose the question, how could it have happened to me/to us, when I/we belong to God?

But if we started with the affirmation ‘I belong to God’, we may realise that we do not have to strive to justify our existence. To be the cleverest around the table, the most experienced or funniest in company, the most useful member of the family, or a group, the best at self-preservation or the holiest person in church. These may be worthy aspirations but none of them is our true identity. Our glory and our dignity is that we have been made in the image of God and therefore we belong to God. And if we do, we can find in our human heart all the divine love, peace, compassion and forgiveness that we are willing to give room for. May the Spirit of Christ help us as we do.

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