

Give unto Caesar...

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22

22 October 2017

Nobody likes paying taxes. The political party that promises low taxation already has a head-start in any general election. This is certainly the case in my home country that I visited earlier this week. They are preparing for a spring general election there and taxes are very much a discussion topic at the moment. There is talk of how governments find ways to get round the taxation problem. A government can claim to reduce income tax, and at the same time impose a much higher VAT, for example, or use other less obvious ways of raising money.

In this the people of Jesus' time were no different from us, they resented taxes too. But they had a lot more reasons to complain about them than we do, because they had to pay them to an occupying power not subject to regular democratic elections, who, therefore could set the taxes as high as they pleased. We know from historical records that they fully exploited this right by collecting crippling amounts of money from the different provinces they conquered to finance what was called for propaganda purposes the *Pax Romana*, the peace of the Roman Empire. The money had to be paid with a silver coin, called *denarius*, which thought to have had the image of Tiberius, the Emperor on it with the inscription *Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus, High Priest*.

So it was a heavy economic burden the coin represented to the people of Judea, but it was also more than that. It was in fact, outright blasphemous to their religious sensitivities, as it claimed divinity for Caesar over against the one true God of Israel. It was so offensive to them that when it was first introduced it resulted in a Jewish uprising and thousands of them died for trying to keep it out of Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, of course, they didn't succeed, but that didn't stop the Temple authorities from using their limited freedom to forbid the use of these coins within the Temple itself. Hence the need for the money changing facilities in the outer court of the Temple. Knowing all this and adding to it the fact that the whole discussion we read about, was taking place inside the Temple (Matt 21:23), we can appreciate just how clever Jesus' reaction was

to the 'catch 22' situation the Pharisees and the Herodians put him in.

'Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?' - was the question. There is no good answer to this. It is like the proverbial 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' question. Whether you answer 'yes' or 'no', you condemn yourself. If Jesus said 'yes', he is caught on religious grounds and he could be alienated from his followers, who hated the Romans and suffered greatly under their taxes, he could even be indicted for blasphemy. If he said 'no', then it's just a quick call to the Roman authorities and he would be arrested for civil disobedience, insurrection or treason. We can feel the tension rising as the whole listening audience is suddenly moved out of their religious concerns and turn their attention to the very down-to-earth, biting problem of paying taxes.

But Jesus' time has not yet come. He does not take the bait, instead with an innocent sounding request 'show me the coin', he takes over the initiative. As his opponents produce the coin, it is they who are being wrong-footed. They are the ones, who carry the blasphemous coins into the Temple, they are the ones who are collaborating with the occupying forces by using their money, they are the ones who sold out to Rome. And the rest follows from there. The image of Caesar on the money indicates that it belongs to Caesar, so it has to be returned to him. Then comes the unexpected second half of the ruling 'and give God what belongs to God.' Now this maybe a clue to make us think there is more at stake here than taxes. Although the people posing the questions may have only wanted to catch Jesus out, in effect they raised a problem that was a serious one to the contemporaries of Jesus no less than it is for us 21st century Christians. What should be the relationship between faith and politics, between Church and State?

When we think about politics and religion we realise their basic differences, one is concerned with power, the other seeks after truth. On the surface they are incompatible and this passage from Matthew's Gospel was often used to put them into separate compartments. It was misunderstood and was taken to mean that Jesus made a strong dividing line between the two realms, the realm of Caesar and the Kingdom of God. This understanding allowed the church to retire behind closed doors and limit its concern to spiritual matters, dealing mainly with the salvation of its members, which was understood by 'getting them to heaven' after their earthly lives. But

this was not the understanding of people like Martin Luther King, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Nelson Mandela. And on closer inspection we can see that this was not the meaning of Jesus either, as he as well as the others have found themselves in the political arena because of their religious convictions.

We have to note that the little connecting word between the two parts of Jesus' ruling is not 'but' which would pitch the two duties against each other, it is 'and'. These are not alternatives, these are two things Jesus' followers have to hold together in some way. And raising the point about the *image*, Jesus is showing the way how. The coin may bear Caesar's image, but human beings bear God's image and although they are allowed to pay taxes to the emperor and fulfil their civic duties to the state, they do not belong to either. They belong to God. So does Caesar, for that matter, but he is blind to it as he declares himself to be God instead. It becomes a question of authority. Caesar may claim authority temporarily for so much of human life because of the power he wields, but there is an area in which physical power is meaningless. He cannot control people's consciences, their hopes and aspirations, their inner guiding principles, and the strength of their convictions that first and foremost they belong to God. As Jesus testifies belonging to God, bearing the image of God has nothing to do with power, or coercion, it can only operate through love and example, through generosity and forgiveness, through inspiration and beauty.

Religion is at its worst, when it forgets this and falls for the all-too-human temptation of accepting power as a means of spreading its truths, maintaining its unity or trying to defend the honour of its God. All we have to do is remember the Crusaders, the Inquisitions, the burning of so-called heretics, or witches, the forceful conversion of large groups of people in the past or see what's happening now, in our day in the name of religion, to realise how true this is. Belonging to God, bearing God's image has to mean relinquishing power, yet it also has to mean to recognise that image in others and extend our respect and concern for their well-being on that basis. The challenge then becomes a question of how to work towards God's good news and God's justice in the world without worldly power, how to interact with the governing authorities whilst maintaining our identity and calling as bearers of God's image and followers of Jesus Christ.

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi and global religious leader says it beautifully in his book 'Not in God's name':

"Religion acquires influence when it relinquishes power. It is then that it takes its place, not among the rulers but among the ruled, not in the palaces of power but in the real lives of ordinary men and women who become extraordinary when brushed by the wings of eternity. It becomes the voice of the voiceless, the conscience of the community, the perennial reminder that there are moral limits of power and that the task of the state is to serve the people, not the people the state. That is why we remember prophets and continue to be inspired by them, while the names of emperors and tyrants lost to collective memory... When religion divests itself of power, it is freed from the burden of rearranging the deckchairs on the ship of state and returns to its real task: changing lives".

The Apostle Paul, just like Jesus, was in the business of changing lives. He did it by sharing his experience of the risen Christ and by the example of his own changed life following that experience. Writing to the Thessalonians he is highlighting the influence they as new believers have had on others. As they recognised in Paul something of the image of Christ and they in their turn started modelling it for others they were able to spread the good news. They did it in a place which was under military and political occupation. Yet, they now knew their place both in Caesar's empire and in God's Kingdom. They learnt that giving all their allegiance to the emperor was idol worship and that their principal duty was to be servants of the true and living God even if it brought some suffering to them. May the same Holy Spirit that filled our Lord Jesus Christ, who called the Apostle Paul and countless others into the service of God, inspire us that we may find the way of living out our faith for the good of others, respecting them in their otherness, teaching them if that is called for, but mainly loving them and not to count the cost. That is the way to give God what belongs to God.

Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church