

Whether or not to pay tax to Caesar - When thinking about this seminal exchange I think it is important to consider the context in which it takes place. We are in the last few days of Christ's life on earth; He has entered Jerusalem and been welcomed as a king; he has cleared out the temple, healed the blind and the lame - there is a palpable sense of momentum. And this prompts the Pharisees to ask Jesus on whose authority he is acting, and he says he will only answer their question if they answer his - was John's baptism from heaven or earth; if they say heaven, he will ask why they didn't believe, and if they say from earth, they will anger the people who consider John a great prophet. This is something of a pre-figuring of the question of paying tax to Caesar. The Pharisees refusal to answer is driven by a fear of the populace, and I wonder if this inspired them to come up with their own, seemingly impossible question heard in our gospel reading?

That fear of public opinion is, for me, one of the most striking aspects of this account; in particular, how incredibly pertinent it is to today's world. A world where just a few words, spoken in the public domain, can spread far and wide in a matter of minutes and, regardless of motivation or intent, results in instant and lasting condemnation. And it is this power of the majority, the potential threat of inciting a mob who object to Roman rule, that the Pharisees are trying to deploy against Christ, if he answers 'yes'. The dilemma He faces is that if He answers 'no' he risks angering the rulers themselves; Jesus is trapped between the will of the people and the authority of the state.

Unlike today's political discourse which generally involves people trying to obscure the truth Christ is, as always, trying to reveal the truth. And although it is a small detail I think the Pharisees reaction to His flawless riposte, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's' is very telling; we are told they were 'amazed'; The King James bible puts it even more strongly, describing their reaction as 'they marvelled' - rather than simply putting them down the man with the power to calm a storm is still showing them mercy, still trying to show them who He really is.

It would be easy to simply admire Christ's oratory but his answer to this challenging question of allegiance is one we must ask ourselves; what are we giving to this world and what are we giving to God?

I think the parables that precede this incident, in relatively quick succession, provide some guidance; we have the parable of the workers in the vineyard, closely followed by The parable of the Two Sons; then the Parable of the Tenants. Put simply, the imagery of these stories involve work, money and authority; all vital and pressing aspects of our existence; priorities which demand much of our time, attention and effort. And one of the principle themes of these parables is the human sense of unfairness; the workers in the vineyard are aggrieved by the fact that they are all paid the same despite some working longer hours than others; and in the conclusion of the parable of the two sons, those ostensibly overt sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, are entering heaven first. This goes against the perceived sense of earthly justice. It does not adhere to the principle of quid pro quo. In short we struggle to quantify it. And never have we quantified more - we live in a world where someone's worth is judged by how many followers they have on social media, how many 'likes' they get when they post an image or comment. Many of us measure the steps we take each day, and if we hit the magic 10000, we perhaps feel we are owed good health.

And I can tell you before a service when Carol is preaching the heart rate monitor on her watch can reach some truly alarming numbers. I am not saying there is anything wrong with it; we find comfort in the idea that this equals that.

But fortunately for us God does not work in the same way. If our sins were measured and totalled, none of us would see heaven. In spite of these failings, we receive the assurance of endless love, mercy and forgiveness. But being aware of this does not mean leaving it all to God. Some of you subscribe to the daily Christian Art emails from Father Patrick van der Vorst and he put it beautifully a few weeks ago when writing about the feeding of the five thousand; he observed that 'Christ was not working with nothing'. He was given what little they had, five loaves and two fish and having given thanks to God, the huge crowd was fed.

We only need consider the quantities that Christ deals in – as Matthew, Mark and Luke recount, faith the size of a mustard seed, can move mountains, and means nothing is impossible. I think ultimately this is what we can give God, rather than striving as the Pharisees did - to be holy through overt and self-serving exhibitions of righteousness, it is though trust in Him, considering His will in every single aspect of our lives that he can fulfil the plans he promises to have for us.

What our Lord can do with a little faith from us is beyond our comprehension; it means we have an almighty and unending alliance; the promise of which is made clear in our passage from Isaiah; the promise that He will go before us, will level mountains, break gates of bronze, cut bars of iron' and who crucially calls us by name, each one of us, individually, in spite of our limitations.

There is a troubling but vital verse in this Old Testament passage, 'I bring prosperity but also create disaster.' I think this goes back to that very human sense of fairness and justice. We all know of people, friends, loved ones, members of our church family, and particularly at the moment, people on the news, who are suffering in ways that are the polar opposite of what they deserve. Such events, can be testing and brutal and feel without end, but I wonder if it can be in these precise moments, when all that we hold so dear in earthly terms is threatened and undermined, that we actually move closer to God.

It all brings to mind the offering of the poor widow in Luke Chapter 21; she had undoubtedly suffered, she had lost her husband and only had two small copper coins, but she gave them both, everything she had – which in God's was far more than anyone else; she gave her all.

We cannot avoid our earthly responsibilities, our tax to Caesar, but it should always be subject to what we give God? It is perhaps put most simply and memorably in the final verse of In the bleak mid-winter, my favourite Christmas carol;

What can I give him, Poor as I am,  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,  
But what I can, I give him, give my heart.  
Amen

**Michael Grist, 22 October 2023**