

Give to God what is God's.

Matthew 22:15-22

You may remember that on Sunday the 30th of October last year, I commented that I'd lodged my tax return a couple of days previously, and for me that was quite early. I said that each year, I resolve to get my tax return done as soon as I can, and each year, I manage to do it in the last week of October. It's not really difficult, and it doesn't take me too much time... and I year ago, I said I would report back in 2023 to let you know how I'd gone with that resolution.

So today, I can happily report that I plan on getting it done this coming week – well before the deadline of October 31st.

Because tax is a serious business.

Al Capone, of course, was a gangster, who engaged in smuggling, bootlegging, bribery, who ran prostitutes and was suspected of murder. But in the end he was not jailed for any of that - they got him for tax evasion.

Tax. Tax? Seriously?

You might remember that Kevin Rudd's first prime ministership was ended mostly by the mining tax.

Going back further, Paul Keating won the unwinnable 1993 election because John Hewson planned to introduce a consumption tax.

Back even further than that: Malcolm Fraser is thought to have won the unwinnable 1980 election on the basis of rumours that Bill Hayden's Labour party was planning to introduce a wealth tax.

Tax. Tax? Seriously.

Oh yes, tax is a serious business. It is a serious business today, just as it was serious business in the first century. And we heard about that seriousness in our gospel reading today.

In Matthew's gospel we read that the Pharisees had challenged Jesus several times, accusing Jesus' disciples of violating the Sabbath laws (Ch12), demanding a sign from heaven (Ch16), asking about Jewish divorce law (Ch19) and demanding by what authority Jesus was teaching (Ch21). Not having had success, they form an unlikely alliance the Herodians as we read in today's passage, and now they get really serious: they challenge Jesus not about his authority, not regarding his apparent violation of the Jewish law, but about tax. And a Roman tax at that. This was serious business indeed.

In today's reading, we have the Pharisees and the Herodians working together against Jesus: The Pharisees were the dominant Jewish group at the time and they hated Roman rule, of course, and worked to overthrow it. The Herodians on the other hand, were those Jews who were doing quite well under Roman rule, supporting 'king' Herod. Collaborators, in modern terms, perhaps.

The Pharisees and Herodians, were strange allies indeed – they were two groups with opposite ideas on the future of the nation of Israel. But they got together to send some people to trap Jesus with a loaded question. And I think it's interesting that the Pharisees didn't go themselves, the modern phrase 'plausible deniability' springs to mind. If things go terribly wrong, then the leaders can claim not to have been involved.

So they put the question to Jesus "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" Now, the tax payable to Caesar, the Imperial tax, was a tax levied on those who weren't Roman citizens. The Pharisees oppose it, and the Herodians support it (well, they support it as much as anyone is likely to support a tax – Saying that they support the system that the tax supports is probably a better way to put it).

When they approach Jesus, they don't just ask that question straight out, they attempt to flatter him first – possibly, I guess, to try and put him off guard – "Teacher... we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are."

And then they hit him with the question "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

The expected answer is either yes or no. It seems likely that neither side is particularly wanting Jesus to support their view, rather they are looking to incriminate Jesus in some way. If Jesus says 'yes' then the Pharisees can denounce him, if he says 'no' then the Herodians can run to the Romans and tell them that Jesus opposes Roman rule.

But Jesus doesn't oblige them with a yes or no answer, and he is aware of their motives. Now, some credit this as great or even supernatural insight from Jesus, but I suspect that just the fact of two bitter enemies turning up together to put a carefully phrased question to him might just have made him at least a bit suspicious. And Jesus confronts them with the truth "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" he asks.

Why? Well, Jesus knows why – and he says "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

And then he asks them to produce a coin, and asks "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?", and having established that it is Caesar, Jesus says "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's".

Rather than getting an incriminating answer from Jesus, they got one that amazed them - and confounded their plans.

Rather than a simple answer about paying taxes, Jesus gives us an answer about the interaction of Caesar and God – about worldly authority and God's authority.

The answer that Jesus gives isn't "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's but give to God what is God's" from which we could determine which things were Caesar's and which were God's, and act accordingly. Rather, the answer that Jesus gives is "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's" – it's not an either/or separation; it's not about us determining who something belongs to.

It's about our submission to authorities, and our submission to God, and by implication, the relationship between those authorities and God.

In the context this question is answered, what is it that is Caesar's? On the face of it, it's the coin, but more deeply, it's what is Roman – what Caesar represents.

So what is Roman? There's a great scene in the movie *The Life of Brian*, where the People's Front of Judea gather in a house in Jerusalem, plotting the overthrow of the Romans.

Their leader, Reg, speaks: "They seize our homes! They rape our daughters! They eat our food! They steal our freedom! They take our pride!" He then asks: "What have the Romans ever done for us?"

There's a moment of silence. Someone tentatively ventures "The aqueduct?"

"What?"

"The aqueduct."

"Oh, yeah, of course, the aqueduct. But, apart from that, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

"Sanitation?"

"Oh, yeah," another agrees, "remember how dirty Jerusalem was before the Romans came?"

"Alright, alright," says Reg, "I'll give you the aqueduct and sanitation. But, other than that, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

A babble of voices: "The roads." "Law and order." "A stable currency." "New markets for our products."

"Ok, ok, ok! Other than the aqueduct, sanitation, the roads, law and order, a stable currency, and new markets for our products, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

I wonder how the Imperial tax compared to the benefits of running water, sanitation, roads, reduced crime and a thriving economy?

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's: Give to Caesar what is due to Caesar.

We are in the world and part of it; we don't get to say "Well, we are God's" and ignore what is due to Caesar – worldly authority – as a result.

We, as Christians, are challenged not to ignore the world. Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God is based firmly on the things of this world. Jesus healed the sick of this world. Jesus reached out to the outcasts of this world. He spoke against the authorities of this world. He didn't simply promise his followers a better life in the world to come.

So I think Christians shouldn't be opposed to civil government; they should be supportive of it. Similarly, governments can be friends to God and God's people. The Pharaoh who took Joseph in, for instance. Cyrus, who we heard in our reading from Isaiah was anointed by God – and he was the king of Persia – he wasn't Jewish at all.

Giving to Caesar and to God is not an either/or arrangement. We need to give to Caesar and to God; to Caesar what is due to Caesar and to God what is due to God. But that still leaves us to answer the question “what is due to Caesar?” Can worldly authorities demand anything and expect that we Christians, at least, will give it?

I don't think so, because we also have the instruction – the obligation – to give to God what is due to God. When worldly authorities – be they rulers or governments or corporations or organisations start demanding what is due to God, then we need to realise that that is wrong: We should not be prepared to give to Caesar what is God's.

And we have biblical examples of denying worldly authorities what is due to God. In Exodus, we read of Pharaoh commanding the Hebrew midwives (Ex 1:16) “When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live”. But the Hebrew women didn't obey Pharaoh; they didn't follow Pharaoh's order, even though he was a legitimate worldly authority. In demanding that the midwives kill the boy children, Pharaoh was demanding what was God's.

And we can see in Exodus 11 the graphic demonstration that the power of life and death is God's, when in the 10th plague (ex 12:29) all the firstborn sons *of Egypt* are struck down.

When Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego were ordered by Nebuchadnezzar to bow down to the idol, they didn't follow the order, because they understood that worship is not due to worldly authority (not even a king).

Similarly, when Daniel was ordered to pray to King Darius, he could have done so to avoid being thrown to the lions, but rather, he chose to disobey the order – and face the consequences of disobeying the order – rather than give to the king something that was due, exclusively, to God.

Much later, when Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:27-29), after being ordered not to teach in Jesus name, they declared “We must obey God rather than men!”

For us, in our lives today, we will seldom have such clear choices. Our governments don't demand that we worship them, or order us to do murder, or direct us to pray to them. And we can be thankful for that, but throughout history powers have arisen which have grown to demand what is God's. Hitler, Stalin and Franco rose to power in predominantly Christian countries, gaining authority and demanding more and more power. Some Christians stood against them, choosing not to give to those Caesars what was God's and they bore the consequences.

Traditionally people often truncate Jesus' answer to the question to “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's” and leave out the God part entirely. People use the saying to justify some things as ‘state’ and others as ‘church’. We hear people say “The Church shouldn't be involved in politics”, and this reading is one of those things used to justify that non-involvement.

But we need to always remember Jesus' full answer to the challenge: So give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. We don't give to one or the other, we are called, as followers of Jesus, to give to both, but our priority is to give to God.

After all, the greatest commandment is clear: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut. 6:5) It is not love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength except that part with which you love the authorities.

It's important to remember too, that Jesus' answer is directed not to Caesar, but to the people who are asking. Jesus isn't telling Caesar what he's allowed to ask for; it's about the people giving. It's not necessarily the authority – the government – that seeks what is God's... if our patriotism becomes nationalism, if a flag or a political slogan, becomes revered to the extent that it is almost an object of worship, we are giving something which is God's. It's not always about what authorities want, but about what we are prepared to give to them.

I think sometimes we want to assign to our government things we know are our responsibility - maybe something like the plausible deniability of the Pharisees in sending and Herodians sending others to ask their questions. Are we concerned for the way people in our prisons are treated? Or is that the responsibility of our government? Is the plight of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders something we should be concerned about, or will the government look after them? Is caring for the poor something that we should worry about, or do we not need to worry about that because there is a social security system to support them?

Do we permit injustice because 'it is the law'? Do we fail to show mercy because it's a failure of the system and, really, it's the system that needs to be fixed – and that's the government's job? Do we turn away from people in need because it's really the government's responsibility to look after them?

Do we focus on giving to the Caesar the things that are Caesar's, at the expense of giving to God what is God's?

Because we must give to God what is God's. Later in Matthew's gospel (25:34), Jesus tells them that the king will say "...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." These are the things that God requires of us; these are the things which we are called by God to give.

Jesus' answer was amazing to the Pharisees and the Herodians because it confounded their plans, and it should be amazing to us; not because it confounds our plans, and not because it can be used to support our own political ends, but because it is challenging. Jesus is calling us to be in the world, but also to belong to God.

We must love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength – but we must also love our neighbour as ourselves.

We must give to Caesar what is Caesar's. We must submit to worldly authority, but we cannot ever do so without giving to God what is God's.

Amen.