

18/10/20 Matthew 22:15-22 Pastor Fraser Pearce

'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

OK, we all pay tax: as soon as we get money in our hands

And start to spend, we pay tax, *we render unto Caesar.*

There is plenty in the Bible about the necessity of paying tax

It's not in principle a controversial teaching in the church.

Naturally there can be debate, also in the church

About what is a reasonable tax rate

And about what the Government's tax dollars should be spent on.

But that we should, as God's people, pay tax: a no brainer.

But what is it that we have to give to God?

What do we have to render to God?

Let's keep this question in mind as we listen to today's reading

Here's how it starts:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

The setting: it's after Palm Sunday

Jesus has entered Jerusalem in triumph

He has cleansed the temple

And now he's teaching in the temple

Note: this is controversial

He's getting into a series of controversies with and denunciations of

His opponents

He has already shown them up as more interested in maintaining power

Than in speaking the truth: John's baptism

And they now want to take him down

So: what we hear about today follows from

The Pharisees attempting to trap Jesus: to show him up

As someone who is just as willing to play power games as they are

They **plotted to entrap him in what he said.**

But listen to this: **So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying,**

They did not go themselves: they sent their disciples

And the Herodians

OK, let's start with the Herodians

It's reasonable to understand that these are people who are supportive of Rome
Perhaps in modern terms, right-wingers: uphold the order as it is
Don't make trouble: don't get carried away with visions of Utopia
And then there are the Disciples of *the Pharisees*
Perhaps in modern terms, left-wingers: they want to shake up the old order
And have a vision of how things will be when they hold the reigns
The Pharisees, in their rhetoric, want to uphold God's law
But in Jesus' evaluation are just as interested in power as the Herodian types
Just not in Roman power

That the Pharisees send *their disciples, their students*
Seems to me to have an aspect of *plausible deniability*
The question they ask Jesus
Is inflammatory from a Roman governing viewpoint
The Pharisees themselves could say
"It wasn't us – you know how students are..."
The text does not explicitly say this, but invites our reflection

Again, let's listen: **So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'**

In a used car lot one thing you can be sure of:
The salesman is trying to sell you a car
One thing they know, that Jesus knows, is that they are trying to trap him
The preamble is part of the trap
They think Jesus presents himself as above the political fray
But is in fact just as mired in it
It's easy to imagine this is today's political climate:
You care about the environment etc...
How many people does your private jet seat?

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

Jesus knows that what they are asking flows from evil intent
And putting him to the test is what the devil did to Jesus in the wilderness
He calls them hypocrites: mask wearers
Those who put on a show for others to win their applause

To gain power from the human community
But he reveals both his divine nature
And the malicious nature of their question
In his response: **'Show me the coin used for the tax.'** And they brought him a **denarius.**

Let's pause: in the temple they bring an offering to the Lord
[It's the word for offering: it's in the temple: Jesus is the Lord]
Also: whatever their motives for questioning Jesus
Their actions prove that they are willing to go along with the system
They are the ones carrying the coin...

Then [Jesus] said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?'

Strictly speaking Jesus asks, whose *image* is this
This is the same significant word used in Genesis

**So God created humankind in his *image*,
in the *image* of God he created them;
male and female he created them.**

And whose image is on the coin? Whose superscription

They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, **'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'** When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

It seemed that he would either have to say *don't pay the tax*
And face the wrath of the Roman imperial forces
Or *do pay the tax*, and lose his credibility as one who speaks prophetically
But he puts the question back on to his opponents
Whether they were what we might call left or right wing in their thinking
What do they have to render to Caesar?
What do they have to render to God?

We, as disciples of Jesus, are listening in to this teaching

It is not aimed directly at us

But at those who oppose Jesus, who want to trap him

And yet Jesus' words have power also for us

They seem to be at the foundation of the teaching on paying tax

That we read about in the writings of St Paul and St Peter

But let's get back to the question I asked at the beginning of the sermon:

What do we have to give to God?

On the one hand, nothing less than the whole of who we are
A coin has the image of the one in charge: we render to them in paying tax
But we ourselves are made in God's image
And are commanded by God to love him
With all our heart, mind, soul, and strength
And something happens within us when we assent
Yes, God, my whole life comes from you and belongs to you
Into your hands I commend my spirit

But today I want to draw your attention to what we have to give God
That he wants, but that might not be obvious
Until we remember who Jesus is

The one who gives this teaching
Is the one who is going to the cross
To take away the sin of the world

What he wants, what God wants, is our sin
Just like a surgeon wants a ruptured appendix
Or a dentist they decay from a tooth
God wants your sin: you are free to render it to your God
Who will give you his peace and joy as a gift to you

In this community we have a unity in the forgiveness of sins
In together giving our sin to God, as we confess Sunday by Sunday
And as God leads us in holy living, in the life of love
May God keep us in this unity, for Jesus sake. Amen.