

## SERMON: Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2017

**Readings:** Matthew 22:15–22; Psalm 96:1–13

### Address

Let me begin by reminding you of two verses from Psalm 96:

<sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

<sup>6</sup> Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Let me also remind you that our gospel reading is located within the Temple in Jerusalem. The holiest place in Jewish tradition, and where, at its centre, the presence of God was said to dwell.

We also have the Ten Commandments making it clear that God has supremacy, and that having images of other gods is abhorrent to God.

The Temple had a whole industry inspired by this. You had to have Temple money to pay the Temple tax, so money-changers gathered in the outer precinct.

Any images of bureau de exchange you may have are far from the reality in Jesus' day. This would be a crowded market place with rates being shouted, a mass of noise, and the morals of the vendors would be incredibly variable. It came with all the others risks of handing over money in a crowd with pickpockets roaming the precinct.

So, if you were to follow the letter of the Law you would have to change all of your money as you entered the Temple, and then change it back again on the way out. So even if you didn't contribute to the Temple coffers you'd lose money. You never get the same exchange rate both ways. So, you'd be on to a loser before you even risked taking out your purse in public to make the exchanges.

So, you can't blame this group of Pharisees and Herodians for still having Roman currency on them. It was just too costly and risky to follow the Law literally. Unfortunately, they kept telling everyone else that they had to, which highlights their hypocrisy.

They did give Jesus advance warning that a pointed question was coming up. If you have been debating and arguing with a group of people for a while and get a preamble of:

"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.

You know they are about to stick the knife in, and they do:

"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

This is no academic hypothetical. An intriguing question to tease out and explore. They are asking if its right to hand over money to the Romans? Should God-fearing Jewish people give cash to their foreign oppressors? Out of the little they have must people living on the poverty line pay their due?

Paying taxes has been a bone of contention since their invention. When taxes become over-burdensome they soon become a cause of resentment, dissent, and ultimately conflict.

The list of examples is endless, from the legend of Lady Godiva's ride, Godiva continuously pleaded with Leofric to reduce taxes on the people of Coventry. Leofric, doubting the strength of her commitment to the cause, said that he would do so if Godiva were to ride naked on a horse through the town. She called his bluff, rode in the buff, and that was enough.

Taxes on tea that sparked the American revolution, on salt that initiated Indian independence, we had the Poll tax riots of the early 90's, and more recently across Europe with the protests against austerity and increased taxation, and the ongoing situation in Catalonia.

Turmoil through taxation was also recent history for Jesus and the people of his time. When Judea was placed under direct rule from Rome in 6 CE a census was taken by Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, Roman governor of Syria, and this led to a Jewish uprising in Galilee.

It was also recent history for Matthew and the community for which he wrote his gospel when anti-taxation protests and attacks on Roman citizens led to rebellion in 66 CE, the fall of the Galilee in 67 CE, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, and finally the fall of Masada in 73 CE.

So, asking if taxes should be paid to Rome was not a simple question. Giving a 'yes' or a 'no' answer was equally dangerous. Say 'yes' and the crowd, the poverty-stricken folk forced to pay, would be against you. Say 'no' and the nearest person in uniform would lead you away for a quiet and potentially terminal word.

So, Jesus replies: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus' reply is not declaring a straightforward division between Church and State.

Again, those words from Psalm 96: <sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. <sup>6</sup> Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

All that we are, and all that we have, is a gift of God. God as Creator underpins Creation, the ground of our being, in whom we live and move and have our being, the energy within us, the universe and beyond the limits of physical reality, without whom no thing exists.

Everything is God's. We may have to give some things to the emperor to make life bearable, but God has the prior claim on us.

The 8<sup>th</sup> point of the Statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the URC: The United Reformed Church declares that the Lord Jesus Christ, the only ruler and head of the Church, has therein appointed a government distinct from civil government and in things spiritual not subordinate thereto, and that civil authorities, being always subject to the rule of God, ought to respect the rights of conscience and of religious belief and to serve God's will of justice and peace for all humankind.

As members of the URC 'justice and peace' is the benchmark we draw on civil government, and where we feel it falls short is when we must speak out and challenge it.

Whenever it is claimed politics and faith don't mix it is clearly done without any reference to the Bible.

Justice and peace is the dream of God that the Bible presents us with.

Living out justice and peace is the call that God makes upon our lives.

Using our time, talents, resources, thoughts, and prayers in the service of justice and peace is what we must give to God. We may have to give the emperors of our world something too, but God has a prior claim on us.

Let me close with the poem:

A TAXING QUESTION Matthew 22: 15-22 © B.D. Prewer 1995

They phrased their question  
guilefully,  
savoured its cunning  
gleefully,  
and put it to him  
artfully.

No man could answer  
truthfully  
a taxation question,  
carefully  
evading pitfalls  
ruefully.

He caught them out  
masterfully,  
as they held Caesar's image  
wrongfully  
in the Temple court  
shamefully.

They went away  
balefully  
to take counsel  
stealthily  
to conclude the matter  
spitefully.

And the chorus of our next hymn:

*Give, then, to Caesar these coins that his name is on,  
give to our God whatsoever is God's.*

*Do what it takes to survive here from day to day,  
yet work for goodness against all the odds.*