

## Reflection for Pentecost 21 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

There are times when it would be so reassuring and so much easier if we could only get clear and straight answers. A straight yes or no; rather than a but, or an if. How often do we ask a question or hear an interviewer on TV ask a question and, at the end of the answer - you are left thinking - so what does that answer really mean?

In Matthew chapter 22, a section of which we heard read as gospel reading, we see the gulf between Jesus and the Jewish leaders growing ever wider and being brought very much into the spotlight. The seeds are being sown for the events that will unfold only a few chapters later, on Good Friday.

It's a gulf that is so great that it even unites two groups that normally would not see eye to eye with each other on many issues - the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees, a Jewish group, that spent a great deal of time studying and keeping the religious law: not just the law as seen in the Old Testament but oral law as well (the commentaries on the Old Testament law). The Herodians, by contrast were a Jewish political party that sympathised with the rulers of the Herodian dynasty, King Herod Antipas in particular, the Roman Empire's ruler over much of the land of the Jews from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. Thus their focus was on Rome and maintaining the status quo. But here they have one common aim or goal, and that was to bring down Jesus.

As this alliance looks for a way to trap Jesus and bring him down, they set their sights on the highly controversial issue of politics and taxation - issues that would lead not many years later, to war with Roman and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The question they use is this: "Should we pay the tribute money to the Roman Emperor? Yes or No?" It's one of those yes or no questions that leaves you caught whichever way you answer. If Jesus refuses to pay the tribute, he will be liable for arrest by the Romans but, if he says pay it, he will lose the popular support he has gained during his ministry.

Jesus' reply is interesting and is one that does not give the yes or no answer they are looking for and would be simple. Jesus asks them to reach into their purse and pull out a coin and to take a close look at it. "*Show me the coin used for paying the tax. They brought him a denarius.*" This is an illustration to us of Jesus' own poverty and the way in which he and his disciples shared a common purse. For Jesus, this world was not about wealth but about following the ways of God and he very much practiced what he preached, in sharp contrast to those who came to trap him.

Secondly, the answer he gives not only exposes the trap placed for him but also the hypocrisy of those asking the question. Whose image is it on that coin? Reluctantly it slips from their tongues "Caesar's" In answering Jesus' question the Jewish leaders were acknowledging Caesar's authority and the obligation to pay taxes. You cannot expect to benefit from imperial roads, education, justice, and freedom from invasions without making your contribution towards these through taxes.

Thirdly, Jesus places the whole question back into context '*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*'

Jesus' answer was not to "give" tribute to Caesar, but to "give back" to Caesar what belongs to him and at the same time to give to God what belongs to Him! To pay taxes for the benefits received from earthly powers should be a reminder of greater dues owed to God. Jesus' answer emphasized the positive, *"to God the things which are God's."* He rejected the Zealot's revolutionary position against Rome, but rejected as well any surrender of humanity's primary relation to God - our greater obligation.

In our modern world and the way we tend to look at life, it is all too easy to lose something of the sharpness of Jesus point. For us there is a clear divide, may be too great a divide, between the religious and the political and secular. We would certainly not think of our political masters in god - like terms, which was the case in the Roman world. Jesus is saying "Yes" to paying taxes but "No" to worshipping Caesar. It was at this divide where the Roman world would so often come into conflict with the early Christians. Christians were peaceful and law-abiding yet when it came to giving the customary worship to the emperor the answer was clearly NO - their loyalty in this area was only directed towards God.

What then does this Yes or No encounter between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his day teach us?

Firstly, today tolerance is seen very much as virtue, and in many respects that is right. But what we see here in Jesus is far more of a controversialist, willing to engage robustly with those seeking to bring him down; pointing out the hypocrisy of what they were trying to do and of their very position. At times, maybe, the church needs to follow more closely the ways of Jesus. Fail to do so and the church may well be seen as increasingly on the margins of society.

Secondly though, and maybe most importantly, Jesus' reply lays down a very important benchmark that can help us as we struggle with the complex issues in life today. Maybe the words to underline are "give back" because we are called to give back to the world that which belongs to the world and to God that which belongs to God.

One writer has helpfully summed it up like this:-

*"When a person does give himself without reserve to the God who gave him everything and formed him in his own image, and when he sets out to render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that are God's, then he has within himself a spring of action which is always questing, always seeking integrity in a world of compromise. He must wrestle to discern the areas where Caesar has no right to dictate. These areas must be handed back to God."*

And that may be the key and the most difficult point - discerning what areas belong to God and what areas to this world.

Jesus words *'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'* are a challenge to us all.

Clearly our first loyalty is to God. How then does knowing what is God's determine our response to Caesar when Caesar asks for this or that?