

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY OCTOBER 22nd

Reading: Matthew 22:15 - 22 [Twentieth (20) after Pentecost]

Here's a piece of political chicanery totally defeated [I don't want to use the term 'Trumped'] by theological come-back. In Matthew's account of the events of the final week of Jesus' life in Jerusalem he (Jesus) faces three challenges from the ruling social and religious elite: a question about paying taxes, a challenge as to the nature of resurrection and a 'test' to give which is the greatest commandment. It is actually a combined party of religious leadership and Roman rulers (the 'Herodians') that confront Jesus. One wonders how the two got together in their mutual scheme. The Temple was the focus of both forms of power.

Matthew actually places the responsibility here on 'the Pharisees' [verse 15]. Too often they have been source of misunderstanding and blame since. In fact, of all the religious parties of Jesus' day, the Pharisees sought the response of faith in daily living. This made them close to Jesus teaching. It would be the Pharisees – if genuine – who asked as to the person of faith's response to payment of taxes.

However, the question they pose is not a genuine seeking of Jesus' teaching, but verse 15 tells us a "*carefully laid out plan*" to entrap Jesus. As early as chapter 12 (verse 14) in Matthew's account they have already decided to have Jesus killed. But they need the cause on which to have him crucified. This requires a political twist as the religious leaders do not have the power to bring charges that will result in Jesus' death. Connivance with the secular Roman leadership is required.

Taxes were a crucial issue for the populace of Palestine in Jesus' day. In a subsistence culture, with ruthless landlords charging indiscriminate rents, the tax burden could be the difference between a year's survival or dependence upon family. Further, in a politically charged environment with an occupying power, taxes could also be a test of loyalties. The tax referred to here is the census tax, the one being assessed at Jesus' birth in Luke's account. Political unrest at this foreign domination, both militarily and economically often gave rise to Jewish nationalism that resisted and rebelled. Such had spilled over into the Zealot movement and the failed attempt at independence in the war that immediately preceded Matthew's record of Jesus [66 – 70 AD, leading to the destruction of the Temple]. As the New Interpreter's Commentary summarises, "*Matthew looks back on this whole movement and its tragic consequences, but knows it was a divisive issue earlier and still engenders deep feelings*" [page 420].

The question put to Jesus is a heavily-loaded one. It is a test of Jesus' attitudes and response to the ruling Romans. Do you sanction their power? How do you respond to this foreign influence and control? Do you willingly co-operate in their oppressive taxation schemes? If Jesus says 'yes', he accedes to this imperial domination of his people. If he says 'no', he is at the mercy of the attendant Herodians.

Jesus' answer is as brilliant as it is simple. He asks his interrogators for a coin, in so doing pointing out that they are carrying one, and therefore dependent upon the currency. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary points out that "*the tax could only be paid in Roman coin*" [Commentary on Matthew, page 420]. In this Jesus provides a small 'play act'. The coin Jesus asks for would have borne both an image of the Emperor (Caesar) and the inscription 'Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of divine Augustus'. For the Pharisees it would be a source of defilement and therefore embarrassment to have a coin to produce. If it was the Herodians who produced one, this would be a moment of division with the Pharisees.

Jesus says, give Caesar his dues. This is to say, in effect, the coin bears Caesar's image, let it be used in his purposes. But then he adds a further answer to a question not asked! And pay God the honour due to God! In effect, work it out for yourselves! Bill Loader comments, "*It is like some of the parables which*

evoke penny-dropped experiences or pass over people's heads". Even those who we are told are seeking to trap Jesus concede that this is a stunning answer [they are 'amazed'] and 'leave him and go away'.

As many commentators have noted, this is not a treatise from Jesus on 'Christian-state relations' (as some have attempted to make it). There is no division of reality into the public (where assumedly, taxes would apply) and the private spheres (concerns of faith). Rather, this is Jesus pointing out the higher call to which all are subject – religious Pharisees and political parties (in this case, Herodians). And in all things, as all things belong to God! Malina and Rohrbaugh in their "*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*" state that to interpret this passage as giving rise to a dual world is "*to confuse ancient social patterns with our own*". They note that economics, religion and politics were not distinct social institutions but 'embedded' within kinship and politics. [page 138]

Jesus' questioners are uncomfortably 'on the spot'. He has evaded the danger of commending non-compliance with the ruling Romans and then cleverly turned the question around to the true agenda of his inquisitors. As well as providing a practical answer, he has said, in effect, 'you're not going to get me on that!' Without demonstrating any dis-loyalty that could be dangerous for him, Jesus has again underlined his ultimate loyalty as being to God.

Of course, Jesus words of "*give to God what is God's*" contains an implicit critique of his religious opponents – they don't! Loader paraphrases Jesus' response as "*If everything is God's, then in all things I will seek God's will and that entails measuring all things, including governments, by the vision Jesus has given us of God's rule or Kingdom.*" There is an echo of Jesus' earlier response to the teachers of the Law in going deeper and closer to the heart of the commands in his repeated phrase, 'You have heard it said, but now I say to you' [Matthew 5].

We must interpret the call of our faith and the example of Jesus in our own contexts. This is often not simple. The issues and challenges are complex. We live in a world of instant technological connection, international terrorist threat and environmental loss and threat. How are we to respond? DO we have to pay tax? Having our values aligned to that which we hold to is always a good beginning point and brings its own answers. Reminder – it is all God to begin with! That should shape our decision-making.

THEMES: Loyalty, Kingdom values, wise living
