

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : 19th Sunday after Trinity ~ October 22, 2017

Now you were probably surprised to be given a coin when you came into church. I assure you that it was a gift from my own pocket and not from church funds. If you've still got it, have a look at it. On one side is the head of our Queen. She is portrayed, just as Caesar's picture was on the coin Jesus looked at, because she is the Head of State and we are her subjects. We know full well that we pay our taxes to make sure that everyone has access to schools, hospitals, roads and so on. Every country works out its own way of organising all this and of course some systems are fairer than others. Maybe my gift will go some way to paying your tax bill? No, I doubt it.

In our reading today from Matthew's Gospel chapter 22, we hear the first of a series of four discussions (or perhaps more accurately confrontations) which give somewhat of a negative picture of the Jerusalem leaders – questions about his authority, questions about the resurrection and questions about the Law. Small surprise that in a meeting of clergy this week, people were moaning – not about Brexit, not about President Trump – but about the difficulties of preaching on Matthew's Gospel during this current year. "Oh I am looking forward to preaching on Mark" said one. But Matthew it is for this year and we cannot duck out of it, even though there are tricky issues in his Gospel which confront both hearer and preacher.

Today, we are thinking about the first of these questions for Jesus from the Jewish leaders – the question asking whether God would have a person contribute a tax on agricultural yield and personal property, collected through census or registration and probably amounting to about one denarius a year (possibly around £4 today) – a tax the citizens of Rome themselves did not have to pay. Although the Jewish authorities helped to gather in the tax, many resented it and objected to it. The Pharisees had contrived their question in order to catch Jesus out, picking one of those 'Catch 22' questions which some love to pose. If Jesus had replied they should pay their taxes to Caesar, that would have upset his followers as he would have been colluding with the Roman occupation and the persecution of the Jews; and if he had replied that they should not pay their taxes to Caesar, Jesus would have had to answer some very awkward questions from the Roman authorities. It was a cunning plan on the part of the Pharisees. But instead of trapping Jesus, the

Pharisees and Herodians are trapped by him. 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Then, as now, people of faith have a duty both towards God and to the state. So Jesus is saying that they must do their duty as citizens of the state but also that they should be generous towards God. Nevertheless it is somewhat of an obscure story. I had a look at some biblical commentators – but they are not unanimous in what this story means. Some point to this passage as proof that God and politics should be kept separate. Others say that this story proves that religion is a personal matter of the heart, and Jesus doesn't really care about mundane things like what you do with your money. Some point out that the Emperor regarded himself as God anyway. Yet others conclude that it is our duty as Christians to support the government of the day no matter what. So what are we to make of it? Perhaps above all, the message for today is that there is still this same balance to be achieved – as much as there was a balance to be struck by the Pharisees and Herodians in their dual commitment both to God and to Rome. Whatever we render to Caesar/HMRC or to our pension fund or to the offering in church, we can never afford to forget this – we belong to God. We may divide our budgets, but we must never divide our allegiance. Or in other words, the theme of today is that everyone, whether leaders or ordinary people, are subject to the ultimate authority and power of God, the living truth.

For us in the United Kingdom, there is little doubt where our Queen stands in all this. The coin I gave you has her head upon it. She is, by any standards, a remarkable person. And a person of strong Christian faith. Which is just as well for us as she is the Head of the Church of England and all clergy have to pledge their allegiance to her when we are licensed as parish priests. One of the noticeable changes over the years has been the way in which her Christmas Day broadcasts have become both more personal in tone and more religious in content. The Queen must be all too aware of the fragmentation of the Christian faith and has taken the opportunity to speak of the way in which her deep faith has made all the difference to her life. We may never be fortunate to witness to the nation as she is able – but that should not prevent us from never being afraid of admitting whose we are and to whom we turn to be our rock. In the passage from Matthew, the message is not 'so much for the state' and 'so much for God or the Church' but 'all things are God's and all duties are second to him'. Our offertory prayer reads: 'Yours Lord is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty. All things come from you and of your own do we give you'. Someone said: "Human beings will argue about religion, write on it, fight for it, die for it. Anything but live it". So a story with which I finish:

A rabbi and a soapmaker went for a walk together. The soapmaker said "What good is religion? Look at the trouble and misery in the world after 1000's of years of religion. If religion is true, why should this be?" The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child, filthy with mud and grime, playing in the gutter. The rabbi said "Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean. We've had soap for generations yet look how dirty that child is. Of what value is soap?" The soapmaker protested "But Rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is used".

"Exactly" replied the rabbi.