

Mk 12:13-17 Tax time
Tim Anderson 13/8/23

A couple of weeks ago,
we heard the Pharisees approach Jesus with an accusation.
“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.
And Jesus responded with a question,
telling them that he would answer their question if they answered his.
“John’s baptism – was it from heaven or of human origin?”
And we realised that Jesus had caught them over a barrel.
They couldn’t say from heaven –
that would expose them as ignorers of God’s prophet.
They couldn’t say of human origin –
that would be too great a political risk –
the people had great respect for the recently martyred prophet.
So the Jewish leaders went away from Jesus.
They probably went to a back room somewhere to lick their wounds.

And if you listen hard,
you will probably hear their indignant voices.
“Thinks he’s clever, does he?
Catch us with a smart alec question.
Two can play at that game.
Let’s think of a question for him!
Let’s ask him some low down question that he can’t answer.”

It was two weeks ago for us,
but it was that same day for Jesus.
And a while later,
the Pharisees and Herodians came back to Jesus with a question.
No doubt it was their attempt to get their own back.
To ask him a question to which he could neither say ‘Yes’ nor ‘No’.

But they didn’t just blurt out their question.

First of all they engaged in a bit of boot licking.
“Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity.
You aren’t swayed by others,
because you pay no attention to who they are:
but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.”

If they meant it,
it would be a great compliment, wouldn’t it?
None of us wants to have the reputation
of changing what we believe to suit the situation.
There’s a very funny episode of “Yes Prime Minister”
where the prime minister has got a bee in his bonnet
about the evils of phone tapping.
He preaches an impassioned sermon about it to Bernard and Humphrey
and when Humphrey tries to argue with him,
he cuts him off with,
“Don’t try to give me the arguments in favour of telephone tapping –
I can find them in Stalin’s memoirs.”
Then it turns out that a terrorist group
has the prime minister’s name on a death list.
And naturally his views on phone tapping take a U turn.
He says, “Surveillance is an indispensable weapon
in the fight against organised terror and crime.”
A couple of back flips like that,
and everyone will know that you’re a spineless jellyfish
who stands for nothing.
So it’s a great compliment
for the Pharisees and Herodians to say to Jesus,
“Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity.”
Well it would be if they were sincere.

But they’re not sincere.
Mark records in verse 15,
“Jesus knew their hypocrisy.”

We tend to think of a hypocrite
as someone who says one thing and does another.
The preacher who preaches about the evils of the demon drink
and goes home and has a glass of port.
But in this case,
it's hypocrisy because they are saying a whole pile of stuff
they don't believe –
they're just saying it
to try to get Jesus to answer what they think is a terribly tricky question.
They don't think
Jesus teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth.
They think he's charismatic charlatan
who is leading the people astray.
But they're licking his boots to try to get one over him.

So what is their super tricky question?
“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?
Should we pay or shouldn't we?”
If Jesus says “No”
then he's a criminal.
The Romans would deal with him harshly.
And there's no question about whether the Romans would find out.
The Pharisees didn't approach him alone,
they brought some Herodians along with them.
Herodians pop up rarely in the gospel stories.
In the earlier encounter that day,
Jesus had been approached by chief priests, teachers of the law and elders.
They all make regular appearances in the gospels.
But you'll only find Herodians here and in Mk 3:6
where they are already plotting with the Pharisees about how to kill Jesus.
Herodians weren't natural bed fellows with the Pharisees.
They were Jews but they were loyal to Herod,
the puppet of the Roman occupiers.
So Pharisees regarded them as traitors.

But clearly the threat Jesus posed
was enough to encourage even these opposing camps to unite for a time.
And having the Herodians along
was all part of the strategy in this encounter.
If Jesus so much as hinted that taxes shouldn't be paid,
the Herodians would report back to Herod
and the fun would start.
Jesus can't say "No."

But they think Jesus can't say
"Yes, you should pay taxes to Caesar" either.
As far as the Jews were concerned,
the Romans were the occupying power.
Paying them taxes was somewhat akin
to someone in occupied France during WWII paying taxes to Hitler.
There was a French puppet government –
Vichy France they called it.
But those who served in the Vichy French government were despised
during the war,
and many were killed after the war.
For Jesus to advocate paying taxes to Caesar
would make him like an apologist for Vichy France.
Not a comfortable place to be.
In fact for the Jews it was even worse than the position of Vichy France.
Many of them thought that paying the tax
didn't just make you a traitor to your country,
it made you unfaithful to God.
Why was that?
The Roman coins that were used to pay the tax,
the coin that Jesus asked to be passed to him,
was not just money.
It was an advertisement for the Roman state religion.
The Romans were happy for many Gods to be worshipped.
But one of the ways they tried to keep their empire in line

was to deify their Emperors after they died.
Everyone was free to worship what ever god they liked,
so long as they took their part in the state religion as well.
That was a way of trying to unify a diverse empire.
For the Jews of course this was idolatry –
and very few of the Roman emperors
actually insisted that the Jews followed the state religion.
They called the Jews a special case,
knowing that it would stir up more trouble than it was worth
to push the point.
They might not have pushed the point with the Jews,
but the money was still a sore point.
On the money was a picture of the Emperor.
And round it was written,
“Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of the divine Augustus.”
In other words,
My name is Tiberius and I’m the son of God.
It was propaganda for the state religion.
A religious Jew didn’t want to have anything to do with such money.
So they think they’re clever.
They think they have Jesus in a fine pickle.

How does Jesus respond?
First of all, he asks them for a coin as a prop.
Who’s in the picture?
Whose is this writing?
These coins clearly belong to Tiberius.
They have his mug emblazoned on them.
If anyone was in any doubt they’ve got his writing on them too.
Forget the blaspheme that’s written –
just think for a minute who caused it to be written.
It’s clear who these coins belong to.
Even the money in your wallet doesn’t technically belong to you.
The physical object belongs to the Australian government –

what belongs to you is the value it represents.
You can actually get in legal trouble if you intentionally destroy the
currency.

The money belongs to Tiberius
So Jesus said,
“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”.

But then the second half of what Jesus is saying is even more interesting –
And give to God what is God’s.

In other words,
“You Pharisees maintain
you have such a high regard for the honour of God.
You get your knickers in a knot
about paying taxes to a blasphemous emperor
with a blasphemous coinage.

If you are so concerned about God’s honour –
you better give him his due too.”

Many of us when we hear Jesus saying,
“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s
and to God what is God’s”,

we straight away think Jesus is saying –

“You ought to pay your taxes and put money in the church offering.”
But I think Jesus’ focus here was much broader than Christian giving.

The reason they needed to pay their taxes
was because Caesar’s imprint was on the coins.

What has God’s imprint on it?

Everything does.

This whole world bears the imprint of its Creator.

If Tiberius was the creator of the coinage –
and so needed to be given his due –

God is the creator of you and I.

We owe him nothing less than ourselves.

He is worthy of our honour

worthy of our praise

worthy of our utter allegiance.

Jesus is gently making the point,
that if the Pharisees were giving to God what is God's,
they wouldn't be treating him the way they are.

So Jesus has answered their tricky question –

“The money belongs to Caesar already.

Give him what's already his.”

And he's done that in a way

that keeps intact his loyalty to his people and to God.

And he's simultaneously pointed them

towards the most important question.

Instead of getting all stressed about national pride

and protecting God's honour –

they need to get on with honouring God.

It might not sound it,

but this verse is pretty radical stuff.

The church has had significant problems

putting Jesus' teaching in this verse into practice.

Let's be clear about what Jesus is teaching –

“It's OK to pay taxes to a blasphemous oppressive government
that opposes the true God.”

More than it's OK.

“You should pay your taxes to a blasphemous oppressive government
that opposes the true God.”

It's counter intuitive, isn't it?

I'm sure there's been the odd occasion

when some of us have wished

that we could protest about some action of the government
by withholding some portion of our taxes.

“If you guys won't open parliament with prayer,

reduce Australia's carbon emissions,

put more police on the street to keep us safe,

give country people the same services as city people,
insert whatever your pet beef is,
if you won't do that,
then I'm not paying any more than 2/3rds of my tax.”
Even if you guys are good law abiding citizens
that give to Caesar what is Caesars,
I'm sure there's plenty of folk out there that would register a protest
if they thought they could get away with it.
But Jesus says pay up.
This is where we get our Christian understanding
of the separation of church and state from.
Jesus is separating the allegiance that is due to government
from the allegiance that is due to God.
This is a radical concept that is unique to Christianity.

Have you ever wondered why it is,
that in today's Israel
religion has such a strong presence in the affairs of state? –
Bibi Netanyahu PM of Israel is actually a Rabbi.
In Iran, the Ayatollahs have as much say in the running of the country
as the president.
But uniquely to countries with a strong Christian heritage
is this idea of a secular democracy.
Have you wondered why it is that there is so much trouble
getting countries like Iraq and Afghanistan to embrace democracy?
Surely after oppressive dictatorships,
they should leap at the chance of representational government.
Part of the reason is because God and the state are fused together in Islam
so a secular democracy makes no sense to a religious Muslim.

Now there are some caveats that must be made.
Firstly, the idea of a secular state that Christians thought up
in response over centuries to this teaching of Jesus
and Paul's development of it in Romans 13

is only about separating church and state.

The state has some jobs which are its domain,
the church shouldn't seek to have an official position
in running the country.

The church has jobs which are its domain
and the state should let the church get on with the work of God.

The idea that is around today
that the church shouldn't have anything to say about the affairs of state
that's a different thing all together.

If Christians in responding to the teaching of the Scriptures
think that it's important to get up in society
and say something about refugees or abortion,
the plight of the poor or ethical standards in business,
the environment or the importance of marriage,
we should be free.

But what shouldn't happen
is if you're a bishop in the church,
then you automatically get a seat in the senate,
or the prime minister chooses the archbishop.

It muddles the boundaries between the church and the state –
if bishops were given an automatic seat in the senate,
then you can bet

that some people would aspire to be bishops
for political rather than religious reasons.

That would harm the work of the church
because we'd have leaders
who aren't really committed to what we're on about.

And in a similar way if church leaders were chosen by the state,
that has the potential to be damaging to the work of God.

Now I said before
that the church has had significant problems
putting Jesus' teaching in this verse into practice.
Even if you think of our Anglican church –

when Thomas Cranmer was appointed the first Archbishop of Canterbury, he was appointed by King Henry VIII.

Charles III is still the titular head of the church of England, he still notionally appoints the Archbishop of Canterbury – though it would have to be said that no monarch of England has wielded that right in the way that Henry VIII did.

Charles will just appoint whoever the church chooses.

Some bishops in England, still get a seat in the house of Lords.

This is not helpful to the cause of the gospel.

I'm very thankful that the Anglican church in Australia has never been an established church.

Being a bishop in Australia has never given you an official position in Government.

The government in Australia has never had an official role in choosing church leaders.

The taxes of Australian people don't support the church.

It happens in Germany and Austria.

But it's a bad idea,

it makes the church potentially subservient to the Government.

We are able to keep Caesar and God separate, and not get the two confused.

And that's good.

Ok, this giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's is an important principle.

But stuff about separation of church and state is a bit removed from the lives of ordinary people.

What should we do?

1. Be thankful to God for our form of government.
2. Be thankful to God for a non established church.
3. Pay your taxes gladly as an important duty.

4. Remember the most important thing.

Give to God what is God's.

That's the only part of Jesus reply to the Pharisees and Herodians that isn't formally a reply to their question.

Jesus is directing them towards what is most important.

God owns you.

He owns all the world.

So in the same way you should happily pay your tax, you should happily give God the honour and worship the commitment of your whole life he is due.