



**Sermon for Trinity 22, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2008**  
**Matthew 22: 15 - 22**

Jesus was not living in a time of credit crunch or collapsing world financial markets; nor was he addressing his audience two weeks before a US Presidential election; and even if he had been he wouldn't have had the world's media constantly reminding him and everyone else of exactly what was happening and what might happen every time they dared to switch on the news! However, his message in today's Gospel reading seems, to me, to speak clearly into our present world situation.

Jesus was having a hard time of it, though, by the time we meet him in Matthew 22 in today's Gospel reading. He is in Jerusalem, he has just cleansed the temple, cursed an unfruitful fig tree and condemned the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the religious leaders of the time! He wasn't winning friends in the establishment very fast! The Pharisees were fed up with him, frightened of the power base of support that he was attracting from a curious range of people, and they were determined to get rid of him.

So we find Jesus being approached by a group of Pharisees and Herodians, a somewhat unholy alliance since these two groups were normally poles apart. But they joined forces to try to catch Jesus out. They brought him a denarius coin. This was the normal payment for a day's wages; it was as common as a £10 or £20 note to us, and in much the same way as our notes contain the chief cashier's promise today, the denarius bore the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great High Priest".

The Herodians were Jews' friends and supporters of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, enemy of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor, whose inscription was on the coin. To the Herodians, the use of this coinage, and therefore paying taxes to their master's enemy, presented real problems. To pay tax meant to acknowledge a foreign pagan sovereignty over Israel, and they hated that. So they were a good choice for the Pharisees to have chosen, to be sent to Jesus, to question him on this important matter of conscience to them, and thereby surely to entrap him. To entrap was a legal offence in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, but that didn't matter to the Pharisees by this stage of Jesus' ministry, they would overlook their own religious laws, they were desperate to get rid of Jesus.

Surely this was one question too far for Jesus to survive.. Should the Jews pay taxes to the Roman emperor or not? In fact, they had no choice in the

matter – they couldn't escape paying taxes. However, if Jesus recommended that taxes should be paid, he would be seen to be condoning the injustice of the Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland, and would alienate himself from not only the Herodians but the vast majority Jewish population in Jerusalem. On the other hand, to say publicly that they should not pay taxes would be tantamount to rebellion and sedition, and would be the fast track to his demise, which is what the Pharisees probably really wanted. Either way Jesus has been skewered.

Jesus' response was by any standards, truly inspired. It is an enigmatic as it is famous. He confronts them directly, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites", "Render unto Caesar the things that are his, and to God the things that are God's". In other words, we live in the midst of two realms; and each realm commands our obedience. We live in a world, in a society, of financial markets: employment, consumerism, market demand. We are part of it; and those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to pay taxes, must pay them for the good of all, especially for the good of those who are the poorest, weakest and youngest of our society. This financial society we have seen, over the past months, is not always built on firm foundations. Yet we also live in a spiritual realm, in which we are offered a relationship with God in Jesus Christ; which gives us eternal purpose and meaning; and the ultimate goal of our lives is communion with God.

The difficult question is where these worlds overlap. That's the messy reality experienced by most Christians who struggle to live by the light of the Gospel in a complicated world. The Bible does not tell us how to react to a credit crunch, or how to respond to tyrants and despots in Iraq or Afghanistan, or indeed how to pray for our brothers and sisters across the pond in this time of election. But it does give us a few home truths. God is interested in every aspect of human life – both sides, as it were, of the denarius. God's compassion is as much available to the recently made redundant city worker as it is for anyone else; and we the church, are called to be agents of that compassion. That's going to be an increasing part of our collective ministry here, I think, in the months to come. But at the same time Jesus' words and actions in Matthew 21 and 22 reminds us that God hates greed, injustice, inequality and oppression: and where they occur, be that in our personal lives or in aspects of the global economy we are called to root them out. There is no room for them in God's Kingdom, and it is for the coming of that Kingdom that we pray for daily in the Lord's prayer.

"Rend unto Caesar the things that are Caesars" and do so with honesty, integrity and for the good of all; and "to God the things that are God" and do so with purity, an open heart, and with the expectation that his Kingdom will come. Amen.

Richard Bartlett