

Sermon St Swithuns 18th October 2020

Matthew 22:15 – 22

When I was growing up in the 1960s, it was quite common to use coins that didn't have the queen's head on them. (show coins).

This country had had 4 different kings and two queens in 60 years. The system of coins hadn't significantly changed in that time, so it was still occasionally possible to find a coin with Queen Victoria's head on it, and plenty with the head of George VI, our queen's father.

In the 60 years since that time, we have had the same queen and our system of coins has changed, so it seems strange to us that we might one day use money that will have a different monarch's head stamped or printed.

To some of us it seems strange to be using physical money at all any more...but that is a different story.

A coin with the head of a ruler features in today's bible passage. The coin was a denarius, a coin of the Roman Empire and it was worth about as much as someone might earn for a day's work on a farm.

The head engraved on this coin would have been an image of the Roman Emperor Tiberius.

Did you hear how Jesus used the coin and the image on it to answer a question?

It was meant to be a trap. This strange alliance of disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians was on a mission to get Jesus into trouble.

The Pharisees believed in religious purity of the Jewish people. They wanted Jesus to side with them against the occupying Roman forces...so that he would be arrested for sedition.

The Herodians were collaborators with the Romans. They wanted Jesus to side with them in agreement with the Roman laws over taxation...so that he would be rejected and perhaps even assassinated as a traitor by the people who hated Rome.

Two factions, polar opposites in attitude over just about everything, but united in trying to trap the son of God.

They asked "is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v17)?

Jesus' answer was brilliant and challenging. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

He used the Denarius and the image of Tiberius to illustrate his point

Jesus completely defused the situation and exposed the hypocrisy both of the Herodians and the Pharisee disciples.

This is a famous story from the Gospel of Matthew and people have thought about Jesus' clever answer countless times.

One of the clear lessons is about the part where Jesus told the people to give back to the Emperor what they owed to him...or at least what they owed to the Roman state.

Living in any society comes with obligations to contribute. Those who follow Jesus have obligations to the governing authorities just the same as everyone else. We benefit from health services, a system of justice and rubbish collections ...so we should expect to contribute to the cost of these things

We do not, by following Jesus, opt out of society or our obligations to the country in which we live.

It is not clever to avoid paying your taxes...no matter what some people may say!

But Jesus' challenge to his hearers then and to us now is so much more than an instruction to pay your taxes and obey the laws set by the government of the day.

Jesus told his hearers then and challenges us to give to God the things that we owe to God.

What do you owe to God?

How much call over your life do you think God could have?

If we believe that all of life itself comes from God, then those who try to live for God know that there is no limit to the scope of what we receive from God.

All of our lives, our possessions, our relationships, our occupations, our families are all gifts. Does that mean that there is no limit to what we owe to God in return?

In the Gospel story, the disciples of the Pharisees were learning the Jewish law and aspiring to become part of the elite religious group of the day. Their whole life was given over to study and strict observance. By living such holy lives, they might very well have felt that they were well on the way to giving back to God the things that they owed God.

But we can see how badly wrong they were. Their zealous efforts to be religious did not help them spot that in opposing Jesus, they were opposing Godself.

What a tragedy, to believe yourself to be devoted to God but to miss the fact that God was there in the form of Jesus. Worse than that, how tragic not only to miss seeing God in Jesus but to actively oppose God by wanting to have Jesus killed.

If only the religious people had heard Jesus' challenge to give back to God the things that they owed to God.

The things that we owe to God are not to do with religious practice unless our religious practices spring from something to do with our response to God and a real desire to live in the way God wants.

Being outwardly holy was what the Pharisees did particularly well. But their motives betrayed an absence of real connection with God. Their religious likeness was as hard and cold as the face of Tiberius on the metal coin.

If Jesus had had a coin that showed an image of God on it, what would that have looked like?

Actually, it would have looked like another Denarius...or like a half Crown, or like a modern pound coin. An image of any person is to some extent an image of God.

This is how God intends it to be. We read in Genesis chapter one, in the creation story that we thought about a couple of weeks ago: "Then God said, "Let us make people in our image, after our likeness."

All people everywhere bear the image of God. Sometimes it is faint or covered up. But the image of God is there in all of us.

So when Jesus challenges us to give back to God the things that we owe God, there is something about this being much more than anything we can do or say or be.

There are of course many things that God's people do and say and are that come straight from our sense of giving back to God in love. Love for God and love for others; generosity with our time and resources; supporting those in need; treating others with Godly kindness; respecting and conserving the environment.

These are things we might consider we give back.

Or we could see these things as the way followers of God just *are*...

Giving back to God is what Christian people do.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we read of the qualities that we can expect to see in any life that has a real connection to God. The fruits of the Spirit of God in our lives are "...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control..." (Galatians, 5: 22-23). These are the real hallmarks of a life lived in fellowship with God.

What Paul is saying I think is that when we have the Spirit of God living in us, our lives become an image of God that is closer to our intended way of being. Life as God made us to be.

We owe everything to our creator God.

However, when we know that our creator is also our loving Father God, we can begin to find out that giving back to God is not a lifestyle of servitude and asceticism.

St Augustine wrote this about God: "whom to serve is perfect freedom."

Living for ourselves is, in fact, a form of imprisonment. Living for God and being filled with the Holy Spirit is the way to find perfect freedom.

Jesus had his conversation with the disciples of the pharisees and the Herodians in the final days before he was to be arrested, tortured and killed. Many people had seen him at work and heard his teaching. Many people recognised God in Jesus and their lives were changed.

It is because of Jesus that we too can recognise God at work. And it is because of Jesus that God's image can become more recognisable in our lives as we live filled with God's Spirit. So that others can recognise God at work in us. All of us.

That is giving back to God.

Amen