

Show me the money

Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:1-52

"In 1789, Benjamin Franklin (the C18th statesman, scientist and inventor, who was a drafter and signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the first postmaster general) wrote to a friend, *"In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes."* In the pre-revolutionary American colonies, the dispute was over British taxation imposed on American colonials who were not represented in the British Parliament.

This kind of dispute is part of what lies behind our reading from Matthew. We are in the time after Palm Sunday where Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is now in the Temple, the heart of the Jewish religion. The atmosphere is febrile in the lead-up to the Jewish Passover. And of course, in Jesus' story, He is only a few days away from the Last Supper, His betrayal and crucifixion, and His resurrection.

He is being challenged by Jewish religious and civic leaders, alarmed by the crowds who had followed Jesus from Galilee and the unsettling effect this was having on Roman-occupied Jerusalem and Palestine. The Pharisees were a highly influential Jewish religious and political group, guardians of tradition, and teachers of Jewish faith law and worship. The Herodians were a Greek-influenced Jewish group, supporters of the Herodian dynasty who were Roman-appointed minor kings.

In Jesus' time Jews paid numerous taxes: temple taxes, land taxes, and custom taxes to name just three. The tax in this altercation is the particularly onerous imperial tax which was paid as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman occupation. First century Jews were required to pay their

oppressors a denarius a year to support their own oppression.ⁱⁱ A denarius was about a day's wage for an ordinary labourer.

The Pharisees and Herodians, usually mortal enemies, ganged up on Jesus and asked Him a trick question: "Should we be paying the poll tax to the Roman authorities?" If Jesus said, "Yes", then he's a backslider compromising the purity of His people's faith. If He said, "No", then He's encouraging civil disobedience to the lawful authority.ⁱⁱⁱ So far, so cynically Machiavellian.

Jesus' response? He says neither, "Yes" nor, "No". He asks His opponents to produce a coin, not any coin, but the kind of coin needed to pay the tax. The clear implication is that He Himself does not have one. His opponents do; and the coin had on it the head of Caesar, and the claim of Caesar to be a god, which to all faithful Jews was blasphemy. Why would strict adherents to the Jewish faith be carrying a Roman coin? And then Jesus' enigmatic reply: *"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* Caesar is not equal to God, there is no comparison, this is what Jesus means.

Caesar is entitled to his due. Christians owe obligations to the state, any state, to live peaceably with their neighbours, to act as responsible citizens and to obey the state's laws, just as long as they do not come into conflict with the higher law, which is God's. Caesar - and any earthly ruler - has a place in the economy of God. But in that economy, for the Christian, it is God Who is supreme.

What we are left pondering is this: it is not simply the case of recognising the earthly rulers; it is about how we recognise God, and what is God's? The coin handed to Jesus had an image of Caesar on it. For the Jews there was no image of God. For Christians, despite two thousand years of visual art attempting to depict God - the old man with the long white beard sitting on a cloud, it is only in the face of Jesus that we see the face of God. God the Father, the Creator, sent Jesus

to the world so that we could see the face of God, and what God looks like. The point of Christmas, and the point of the incarnation, the God-made-flesh, is so we can see God face-to-face, in the person of Jesus.

We might be tempted to wonder what did the face of Jesus look like? We might be tempted to look not only at two millennia of fine art, but at the stained-glass images in this Church. Every wall, north, south, east and west has images of Jesus.

Except they don't. Nowhere in the New Testament is any description given of what Jesus looked like. We don't know His height, or the colour of His eyes or His hair. Olive skinned maybe. Dark eyed maybe. Bearded maybe. But we don't know. Jesus was real enough, make no mistake, a person in history. You couldn't invent an imaginary person who never existed who went on to create the ripples and waves in the history of time that Jesus did without Him being real. But we search in vain for His face. No coin, no painting, no stained-glass. No pale Galilean with wavy blonde hair, tall and piercingly blue eyes. That was Victorian projection, and a MAGA fantasy.

The coin given to Jesus with Caesar's image stamped upon it may have been clear enough. Our calling is not to look like Caesar. It is to look like God. Our calling is to bear the image of God - not in our physical looks - but in our actions and words; in our understanding and generosity; in our kindness and caring; in our pursuit of fairness and equality. When we are '*like*' these things, we will be giving God His due. When we are '*like*' these things, we will look like, well, God. Not the physical looks, but the behaviour; not the physical looks, but the motivation; not the physical looks, but the temperament. We are to show God's image, from head to heart, from hands to feet, so that the world might see and hear and feel God at work in the world today. Inside and outside the Church. When we become these things then people will see the image of God at work in us

and through us. The mystery becomes practical. The invisible becomes visible. The impossibility becomes possible. When we, through what we say and think and do, reveal God to the world now. Old or young, male or female, gay or straight, confident or nervous, black or white, powerful or weak; from every continent and every community, from every part of the human family, something of the image of God is to be seen. We need not understand all the detail, or what happens with other faith traditions, or even with those outside any faith family. That's God's business and for God to sort out. *Our* business is not to mask or deface the image of God that is lurking around us. In the twinkling of our eyes, or the kindness of our hearts, or the generosity of our hands, or the willingness of our feet. Giving time, talent, money; giving hope, joy and peace. Sharing laughter, compassion and whatever energy we have so that in this parish Church, and beyond, intimations of God's activity are seen and heard and felt.

We do not have to be very good at it or practically perfect in every way. All God asks of us is to be like Him and try our best, and make all the difference that the world needs to see. It's a marvellous thing to be a Christian. It's a wonderful thing to have a life that is oriented towards goodness and generosity and laughter and joy. It is a privileged thing to know that as individuals and as a community of believers we will find so many gifts and talents and skills that when woven together will throw a blanket of mercy and comfort and warmth around the whole world. When we render to God the things that are God's, people see God, through us.

"Show Me the money", said Jesus and He was handed a metal coin with a Roman emperor depicted on it. An image rendered in the medium of cold, hard cash. But the coin of the realm in the Kingdom of Heaven is no metal thing. It is in the flesh and blood, in the imagination and action of our human lives. It is in the singing and praying, the lives of service and helpfulness that is what we are and what we do.

The Greek word for 'render' is *apodote*, which means to 'give what is due by obligation'. We are obliged to pay our taxes and be good citizens, says Jesus. But also we are obliged to demonstrate Godly life in our daily Christian living. Jesus leaves that balancing to Christians in every age. Maybe we should be asking do we give more to the secular world than to the sacred? There is a question! How is it with you?

In the meantime, we bear God's image - as the palm of God's hand bears ours. This God Who also *'calls us by our name'*.

Show me the money! In a dark world made by darkness and the wanton misuse of power, we are called to witness to the light, and to the power of love that made all things. We are to be the image of God today in this world.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy, 1789, quoted, David J Lose, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 2*, p189

ⁱⁱ Lose, *ibid*, p189

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, *But I Say To You*, p283