

Address for 18th October 2020

Build Each Other Up

In Matthew's Gospel we heard the story that ended *'Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God'* (as worded in the Good News Bible). Or from the New International Version *'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'*

And this story is full of tension from beginning to end. It begins with the words, *'Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.'*

The Pharisees were really out to get him, so much so that they teamed up with unlikely bedfellows known as the Herodians. The Herodians, as their name suggests, were supporters of Herod and the Roman rule. We might think of them more like a political party. The Pharisees, on the other hand, interpreted God's law as they saw it and considered themselves to be spiritual leaders.

Basically, the Pharisees and Herodians didn't like each other. But, when it came to trapping Jesus, then the slogan *'The enemy of my enemy is my friend'* came into play and they discovered a common mission in discrediting Jesus before the people.

After buttering up Jesus by telling him they thought he was a man of principle, not easily swayed by public opinion, they threw out the key question: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" And Jesus asked them for a coin.

Some people say it was a denarius – a day's wage; so it was worth quite a lot of money. And a denarius just so happened to be the tax an Israelite had to pay annually to the Roman government: one day's wage per year.

And I can see Jesus, in my mind's eye, taking the coin and looking at it. He would have seen the image of the emperor on it and around the edge he would have read the words *'Tiberius Caesar, the son of the divine Augustus'* meaning that the previous emperor had been elevated by the Romans to a divine status - a statement which is offensive even to our ears.

And the Pharisees and Herodians thought they'd got Jesus between a rock and a hard place with their clever skulduggery! They might have spent hours, or even days, conniving and scheming to come up with this ambush. Planning, calculating, rehearsing; and deciding who would deliver the accusing proclamation and damnation of Jesus when he condemned himself by falling into their trap.

But Jesus isn't going to fall into their juvenile trap.

He isn't going to say 'Yes, it's right to pay the tax' and find himself in trouble with the crowds who hate paying the tax. I'm quite sure they would have been listening intently. And he isn't going to say 'No, it's not right to pay this tax', because then his enemies will accuse him of stirring up dissension against the Romans.

But with wisdom like that of Solomon, Jesus simply tells them the truth. And his enemies are silenced and left to skulk away in shame and embarrassment. It's about getting the balance right.

Today, we find ourselves as people of faith living in a secular world. We abide by the laws of the land, which means that we have responsibilities – and one of those responsibilities is paying our taxes. It's our moral duty to pay our 'duties'.

But we also know that **all things** belong to God and that our first allegiance is to him; and this isn't about duty, or responsibility, or morals – it's about adoration, and praise, and love. And that's what makes our allegiance to God so powerful.

In Paul's letter that we heard earlier, he commends the Thessalonians on keeping the faith. Paul had founded the church in Thessalonica, he developed and explained and taught whilst he was with them - and here in his letter, he encourages them in their work.

But he doesn't do it by beating them with a stick. He talks to them with love and passion. He recognizes the good work they are doing, and gently reminds them to be patient and steadfast and he commends them for the way they have lived out and shared the gospel.

And those words from Paul are an example of how we should treat each other. We are to support and encourage each other through these difficult times. We should build each other up in God's Kingdom.

I said that our first allegiance is to God, and that allegiance is powerful. And it's because of that powerful allegiance that you and I are talking to each other today.

You know, this morning you could have just given it a miss, and no-one would have known. But you didn't. This morning you 'clicked here to worship'.

And that's why you are joining in the Amen's after praying with me, and you are listening intently to the readings, and robustly singing the hymns – and it has nothing to do with duty, or responsibility, or morality; you are doing this because you love God, and you know that God loves you: God first, God in the middle, God at the end, and God in eternity.

We are citizens of God's Kingdom – and we are to love as we are loved.

So let us continue to encourage each other, and build each other up; remembering that our God comes first, middle, last, and everlasting. **Amen.**