

**(1 Thessalonians 1:1-10) and Matthew 22: 15-22,
Sermon for Sunday 18th October 2020**

When preaching on the content of the gospels, it is not unusual for me to start a sermon with the words, 'our reading today begins with the Pharisees trying to catch Jesus out'. It happens quite a lot and today's reading from Matthew's gospel is no exception. The Pharisees are at it again with Jesus –and this time they've hooked up with the Herodians. We don't know that much about the Herodians save that they were big fans of Herod, they were Jewish believers and they did not like Jesus – and it is pretty much this that unites them with the Pharisees. They probably disagreed about almost everything else, and we not natural allies, politically or religiously, so pretty much the only thing they agree on is that they are good Jews and that they don't like what Jesus is saying and doing!

And they come to Jesus clearly intending, once again, to catch him out with a question that they hope the answer will get him in trouble.

It seems the issue of paying taxes is not a new political hot topic. It was one of the issues for the Jews in Jesus' day. They were under occupation by a foreign and unwelcome power, the Romans who had marched in, taken land and power and then, to add insult to injury, were demanding a tax to be paid to the emperor, the other option being death. A compulsory and very unwelcome tax.

And so they ask Jesus – is this right? I think they knew the answer they were hoping for, or at least how difficult an answer would be. It would be perfectly reasonable for the leader of a new godly movement to oppose this foreign tax. Surely someone proclaiming God as king would oppose Caesar and his claims.

But of course, they also know that Jesus, if he opposed the tax, would get into trouble. It seems to be a no win situation for Jesus. Any answer will get him into trouble – either with the other Jews or with the Roman authorities.

But it seems that the trick is turned round – those out to catch Jesus out, find themselves being caught out when he responds. He asks them if they have one of these foreign coins, used to pay the tax. They hand one over to him. Now this may seem entirely benign but, actually, this is loaded with meaning. In handing over a coin, they are admitting that they are in possession of this despised currency. Now the currency was disliked and hated as it was a symbol of this foreign occupation but the problem for the Jews was also what was on the coin. On the coin would have been an image of Caesar – and their religion forbade a human image to be portrayed – on coins and the like but more than that, around the edge of the coin an inscription saying who Caesar believed himself to be. Son of God, high priest. No loyal or devout Jew, exactly what the Pharisees and Herodians were, would be happy to handle these things, or be in possession of them, that is why they were trying to trick Jesus – except they were.

And Jesus says those familiar words Render unto Caesar that which is Caesars, or in this translation ‘give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s’ and ‘to God what is God’s’. They would have been astonished. Telling them to pay the tax. But he isn’t just doing that, he is really challenging them – have you really given to God everything? It seems they were happy to talk about the rules of being God’s people, but he had caught them actually with their fingers in at least two pies.

Compromised. Had they really given full allegiance to God or were they actually playing games, keeping Caesar happy but speaking about God?

There they were trying to catch him out. But actually they couldn't, he knew what was going to happen. He had already spoken of what was to come for him, death. He wasn't interested in wriggling out of political or personal danger. He was not interested in being the kind of revolutionary everyone perhaps wanted him to be, he was intent on following the path of God and he was challenging others to do the same. Don't pay lip service to God, while keeping Caesar and the Romans happy on the side.

The challenge is one of all out devotion to God, not the world around. Our whole lives should be directed Godwards.

Our lives aren't separated off into the things that God's not bothered with and the things God is bothered with. **'All things come from you, and of your own do we give you'** is a line we say so often in our offertory prayers – but what does it mean? It's all God's – our lives, ourselves

How would it look if we involved God in all areas of life? Not just in what we say, or what we do in public, but always – in our thoughts, our motivation, our choices. Do we say that everything is God's, do we say we will love him with everything we have and love others in the same way but then make decisions – about our spending, our consumption, our finances, our whatever it is – that betray that love or exploit others?

God is God of everything, questions like this are not optional extras. They are part of God's transforming work in us. Our challenge is to give to God all of us, every aspect of our lives, to be transformed by his power in Jesus, to render to God that which is God's, which is of course, everything. Amen