

## Christ the King of Everything (including your wallet)

This morning Phil has clearly set me up to talk about money. We can all see it coming. Most of you will have heard his sermon last week on sacrificial giving and the widow who put into the collection pot all she could afford. And if you didn't, you can find it on our website and listen to it at your leisure. Now here I am this morning with a Bible passage in which Jesus is asked about paying taxes and tells us to "Give to Caesar what s Caesar's, and to God what is God's". So I reckon you can all see where this is going, right? And I can just sit down now and leave you to it?

Well, let's see, as I'm afraid none of us gets off that easily! I thought I'd start with a word from the Beatles, who sang in one of their early hits, "Can't Buy Me Love": *"I don't care too much for money, for money can't buy me love"*.

That's an example of what some in society think of money, but what view does the Bible give us? Let's turn back to Matthew's Gospel and find out. To start with we need to look at what happened before this morning's reading, starting in chapter 21 verse 23, as that gives us the context to what was going on. Here we see Jesus entering the temple courts, and the chief priests and the elders questioning his authority. But Jesus confounded them a question about John's baptism, which they couldn't answer, and then told three parables to highlight their failure to understand the Scriptures. That takes us to the start of this morning's reading, at Chapter 22 verse 15, with the Pharisees highly offended and looking for a way to get back at Jesus. He had trapped them with a question, so now they are looking for a way to do the same. They think they can destroy his influence with the people by getting him to say something that will either discredit him or get him in trouble with the Romans. You can just imagine them, sitting in a room somewhere arguing over how to set their trap. I can really relate to what would have been going on. When I'm trying to write the perfect piece of advice for a client, or draft a contract in the best possible way, I can agonise over it, writing and rewriting, running it past my colleagues for a second opinion, sometimes debating it endlessly, before coming up with the perfect piece of work. The Pharisees must have done the same, angsting over their question, rephrasing it and getting all the nuances just right, so that they would give Jesus nowhere to go.

But when I've spent all that time on something, I generally feel proud of it and want to be the one who presents it to my client. Not so the Pharisees. They clearly had just enough guts to write the question, but not enough actually to ask it, so in verse 16 we see that they sent their disciples to Jesus with it instead, and a group of Herodians for good measure. All we know about Herodians is that they were supporters of Herod, the local King and effectively ruler on behalf of the Romans. That makes them an unlikely ally for the Pharisees, who generally opposed Roman rule, but here they have a common enemy in Jesus, and of course if they could get Jesus to say that people shouldn't pay their taxes to Rome, who better to hear that and do something about it than the Herodians? But sending disciples is a tactical move of cowardice by the Pharisees. If their disciples can beat Jesus with their question, that really undermines him with the crowd (and makes those disciples look good, which is probably why they were willing); but if Jesus gets the better of them, the Pharisees can waive it off as the foolishness of amateurs and will not themselves be embarrassed by the defeat.

These disciples, then, start off with some warm flattery. It's probably a bit of a warm up, both for themselves, but I suspect planned to make Jesus feel comfortable and amenable to them, and more likely to engage with their question. I am sure we all do this sort of thing all of the time, and it can be very effective. Flattery can cause people to lower their guard and do or say things they otherwise might not. There is great irony in this specific flattery, though, because what the Pharisees' disciples intend only as a ploy is, in fact, true; Jesus is sincere; his teaching is dependable; and he does not defer to powerful people.

Then they hit him with the question, in verse 17: *“Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”*

The tax in question was a poll tax, which was first imposed when Judea became a Roman province in 6 AD. It generated great opposition from the people because they saw no visible benefit from paying it – their money was simply redistributed from Judea to Rome. At a denarius per person, it was not an insignificant amount; about a day’s pay for an ordinary worker.

This is the Pharisee’s masterstroke. Designed to sound like an academic question to an authoritative teacher, who has just been flattered and encouraged to respond, it demands a yes/no answer, but is a question that Jesus cannot safely answer. If he says yes then the crowd, oppressed by the Romans and their taxes, will turn against him; but if he says no, the Herodians will report him for fomenting insurrection and the Romans will arrest him and probably execute him.

To us, reading the Bible 2000 years later, it sounds as if Jesus sidesteps the question beautifully, but actually, if you dig a little deeper, he does a lot more than that. He asked in verse 19 for the coin used to pay the tax, and then two questions in verse 20: *“Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”*

The coin is easily found – a Roman denarius. This tells us something about the people asking the question, because at the time carrying a Roman coin, especially inside the temple, was a big issue. That’s at the heart of Jesus’ next two questions. When Jesus asks about the picture on the coin, he is not just asking who it is; that it is Caesar, the Roman Emperor, is already obvious to everyone. The Greek word used here literally means “icon” or “image”, and is an example of Jesus quoting the Old Testament to his audience (which he does a lot more than we realise, because the tradition was not always to quote long texts but often very short snippets, maybe of no more than a word or two). Jesus is reminding everyone of the 10 Commandments, in which God very clearly instructed his people not to make idols, or images, of anything (find it in Deuteronomy, chapter 5, verse 8). No truly observant Jew would carry in their pocket something that broke that Commandment. Yet here it was, in the pockets of trainee Pharisees, inside the temple!

And the second embarrassment for these people is in Jesus’ second question: *“And whose inscription?”* Again, he is quoting the Old Testament; in Deuteronomy Chapter 6 verse 9, the Jews were instructed to inscribe the 10 Commandments on their doorframes and gates so they would not forget them. The actual wording of the inscription makes things worse. It would have read *“Tiberius Caesar, August son of the divine Augustus, high priest”* – not just identifying the image as one of Caesar, but a clear reference to the Roman religion of emperor-worship. By asking these questions, Jesus was drawing attention to the fact that a blasphemous item had been brought into the temple, and embarrassing his questioners. The Romans had minted coins so that observant Jews could avoid carrying the denarius, but they were lower denomination and so more would have been needed to pay the tax, and as currency generally, so what is highlighted is laziness overtaking the rules of religion.

Jesus didn’t say whether or not the tax should be paid, but the coin is clearly Caesar’s, and he did say in verse 21 that it should be returned to its owner (the Greek word used here literally means “give back”). But he also then said we should give (back) “to God what is God’s”. So what does he mean by that?

“Ahah!” you might now say. “Finally we get to the bit where Simon’s going to tell us to give lots of money to the Church. We’ve seen that coming and been waiting for it.” Well, yes. That’s part of it, but it’s not the whole answer. So “Ahah!” to you too, if you thought that! The question we need to ask ourselves is, what is God’s? And the answer, fittingly today especially as it is the festival of Christ the King, is found in Psalm 24 verse 1: *“The Earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world and all*

*who live in it*". Just as the denarius bore the image of Caesar, we are made in the image of God (see Genesis, chapter 1, verse 27), so Jesus is not just commanding us to give money to the Church, but to give ourselves; and not just a tithe of ourselves, as the Old Testament commanded the Jews to give, but the whole of ourselves, and everything we have. That is how the Pharisees' disciples would have understood Jesus' response. So it is no surprise that they were amazed; the Pharisees' best minds had spent hours perfecting the question and setting their trap for Jesus, and with no preparation at all he had seen through their cunning and evaded it, and not only that but had yet again managed to criticise and challenge them whilst showing up foolishness.

But we can't just leave it there. What claim does God have to demand everything from us?

As a Christian, I believe that God created us, in his image, to give glory to Him. You might remember from our final study on the Five Solas of the Reformation that that is what Luther and the other Reformers understood and believed from their study of the Bible – "Soli Dei Gloria" / "To the Glory of God Alone". I also believe that all the little things I do, every day, that are not glorifying to God, that place other things in priority to Him, which the Bible calls sin, prevent me from doing what I was created to do, and cut me off from God. And because God is so just and holy, he cannot leave that sin unpunished. I believe that, as Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans, "*the wages of sin is death*" (Romans, chapter 6, verse 23); that, because of my sins, I deserve to be punished by God and that, if God is just, that punishment is eternity without Him. I can confess my sins and seek forgiveness, but my nature is to sin again. The old Jewish system of the law demonstrates this beautifully, with all their sacrifices and offerings never being enough and always having to be repeated time and again. The good news, for me and everyone like me, and which as a Christian I also believe, is that God became a human, in the form of his Son, Jesus, and broke that otherwise never-ending cycle of inadequacy. By dying on the Cross, Jesus took the punishment that I and everyone else deserve for all our sin, and then by rising again (as no sacrificed lamb, bull, pigeon etc could do) he showed that his death was bigger than all sins combined, and that he had defeated sin and now, after the Resurrection, rules over all. You might remember from October the other four Solas of the Reformation: "Sola Fide" / "By Faith Alone"; "Sola Scriptura" / "By Scripture Alone"; "Solus Christus" / "Through Christ Alone"; and "Sola Gratia" / "By Grace Alone". The good news that we can learn from Scripture, the Bible, is that by Faith in Christ and his sacrifice on the Cross, which was a gift of Grace from God and not something we remotely deserve, because of our sin, we can escape the cycle of sin and be reconciled with God. If that is news to you this morning, Phil or I or many others would be delighted to discuss it further with you. Please just ask.

So today, as we celebrate the festival of Christ the King, we need to think of Christ as the King of Everything; of the world he created, of nature and the Earth's resources, of our Church, of our family lives, of our workplaces, of our diaries, of our holidays, of our houses and cars and TVs and the internet, and yes, of our wallets or purses, cheque books, debit/credit cards, and bank accounts. "Give to God what is God's", said Jesus; everything we have comes from God and belongs to Him, so everything we have must ultimately be accounted for to Him; we need to spend, or invest, all our money, time, energies, skills and other resources wisely.

Let's finish pretty much where we started, with The Beatles. In the second verse of "Can't Buy Me Love", they sang: "*I'll give you all I've got to give if you say you love me too. I may not have a lot to give, but what I've got I'll give to you.*" Through Christ's death on the Cross, God has told us very clearly that he loves us, and just how much He would give for us. How much have you got to give to God, and how much is he asking from you? Dig deep, and be generous; and remember that money is part of what's owed to God, but it isn't everything.

AMEN.