

Tuesday 2 June 2020: “Give to Caesar”

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on 2 June 2020

Readings: [2 Peter 3.11-15, 17-18](#); [Mark 12.13-17](#)

‘Give back to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor and to God the things that belong to God’, Jesus told the astonished Pharisees and Herodians who had deliberately tried to trick him. Two unlikely groups allied in their desire to catch Jesus out. The Herodians had good reason to latch onto the question of whether it was religious to pay the poll tax levied by the Roman overlords: they were a group of nationalists who sought political independence from Rome, and objected to the harsh taxation of the Roman authorities. The Pharisees were a group of Scripture scholars who adhered closely to the religious laws. In much of his interactions with the Pharisees, Jesus suggests that they interpreted those laws too literally: keeping the letter but not the spirit of the law. Both groups were opposed to paying the poll tax levied by the Roman occupiers. And so they sought out Jesus to see what judgement he would make. ‘Rabbi, we know that you are sincere and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality’, they approached him for his opinion.

The evangelist St Mark tells us that Jesus saw through their deference straightaway, and decries it as hypocrisy. In the same way in which, at the beginning of his public ministry, he had challenged the devil who had tempted him, he tells his questioners: ‘Why do you put me to the test?’ And he proceeds to give them an example. ‘Bring me a denarius and let me see it’, he instructs them. When they had brought the coin, he further interrogates them: ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ And they answered: ‘the emperor’s’. And Jesus tells them to pay taxes, to give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to give back to God what is God’s. The Greek word used here, *apodidomai*, is only used four times in the Greek scriptures. In each case it deals with the repayment of a debt. ‘Give back to Caesar what you owe Caesar’, Jesus says, and leaves his listeners to work out what it is that they think they owe the emperor – both groups would have given differing answers to Jesus’ question. When Paul uses the same word in Romans, he affirms that religious people are bound to pay taxes: ‘Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due’, our patron saint instructs.

While it is important that Jesus, the friend of tax collectors and sinners, tells his hearers to pay taxes – and indeed will miraculously produce a coin to pay the temple tax for his disciples and him – what Jesus says here about our obligations to God is much more important. ‘Pay to God the things you owe God’, he instructs them. It is impossible for believers to pay God the things we owe him. God gifts us life in this world and promises us life in the next. He gifts us forgiveness of sins. He gifts us community. He gifts us his constant presence and protection. It is much easier for believers to pay Caesar’s poll tax than to pay back to God what we owe God.

Yet Jesus instructs his listeners to do exactly that. In the same way in which the coins of the Roman empire were marked with Caesar's image, we bear God's image. Those who bear within themselves the image of God belong to God. And we, the image bearers of God, owe to God all that we are. Jesus' questioners leave him, astounded. Both at the authority with which he pronounced his opinion, and at the audacity to suggest that even though they followed the religious laws to the letter the Pharisees and Herodians were significantly short-changing God. They gave to God what was commanded; only a fraction of what they had received. They did not repay God all that they owed.

From the perspective of the cross we know that it is impossible for humans to repay God all that we owe. We might bear his image, but our own selfishness and sinfulness often mars God's image within us. If we tried to repay God for what he has gifted us, we would fail utterly. And so it was that, at the cross, Jesus gave to God all the things we owed him: life, obedience, trust, all that we are and what we have. As he was crucified, he gave back to God what God has gifted us. Not with coins that bear the image of a foreign ruler, but in a sinless and grateful body that bears the image of God. 'Pay back to God the things that are God's', Jesus instructed his questioners and proceeded to pay that price himself for all humanity.

The fact that you and I, in our own strength, are unable to pay back to God what we owe him, and that Jesus has already paid back to God what is owed, does not mean that we should hold back from God what really is his. God wants us to use the gifts he gives us in his service. God wants us to use our talents in his service. And he wants us to use our money in his service. In the light of Jesus' gift of life on the cross, the impossible command to 'give to God the things that are God's' is transformed into a gift of gratitude. We do not render to God the things that are God's out of an obligation – that has been settled by Jesus – but out of love and gratitude.

God wants us to use our gifts in his service, wants us to love him and our neighbours as ourselves. In gratitude for his gifts of love and life, of forgiveness and renewal, he wants us to serve him by serving one another, and not lose sight of the needs of the world. And that is important for us to hear this Reconciliation Week. That while we have an obligation to render to those in authority that which is due to them, we have a much greater obligation: to render to God, and God's people, that which is God's. To share of ourselves, and our resources generously and graciously, so that all who bear the image of God, every human being, is accorded the honour that is due to God.

We all bear in ourselves the image of God, regardless of our background, our race, or nationality, our gender. We cannot pay back God for the gift of our life. But we can use the gift of our lives to advocate for the lives of those who suffer as a result of oppressive structures, exclusion and injustice. We can use our gifts, our intellect, the force of prayer, our voices, our privilege, our money, our insistence, our faith, our fellowship, our democratic



rights and obligations, in ensuring that those who bear God's image are accorded equal honour, equal rights, and equal justice. 'Bring me a denarius and let me see it', Jesus said. 'Whose head is this?' The emperor's likeness identifies the emperor's dues. God's likeness, imprinted in each one of us, identifies God's dues. 'Give to God the things that are God's'.