

## Matthew 22.15-22

Today's gospel is one of those stories which contain the whole of Jesus's teaching. Above all in the saying, 'Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

The place is Jerusalem, in the last week of Jesus's life. After the riotous scenes of Palm Sunday, the Pharisees are looking for a reason to discredit Jesus, perhaps get him arrested. So they set him a trap. 'Teacher, we know that you are honest, and teach the truth about the way of God, and don't care what anyone else thinks. Tell us then: is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?' The trap is that if Jesus says yes, then he's admitting that he ought to keep the Romans' laws, and if he says no, he's a rebel and the Romans can arrest him.

You have to feel sorry for the Pharisees here. Because, of course, Jesus is honest, and he does tell the truth about God. When he tells people to repent and turn to God, and to put all their trust in God, he's saying exactly what a good Jew should say. And deep down the Pharisees must know that; they know they're being dishonest, and they're trying to persuade themselves that it's for the greater good. We all know how painful it is when you have to persuade yourself that something bad you're doing is for the greater good.

The problem for the Pharisees is that they're afraid to trust in God. Because God may be with Israel, but the Romans are here for certain, and they are short-tempered, exploitative and they don't care how many of their subjects die. The Pharisees are scared that the Israelites will get into trouble; they're scared of losing what freedom and power they have, and they're scared of Jesus stirring a bad situation up.

But Jesus puts all his trust in God, and he isn't afraid of anything. He rubs it in. 'You hypocrites,' he says. And then he calls for a coin.

You notice that he has to call for a coin. He doesn't have one on him. There's the message, right there. You don't have to be part of this. He's telling the Pharisees, you are free not to get into the mess you're in, where you kow-tow to the Romans and put down your own people and persecute anyone who stirs them up.

You could just not take the Emperor's money, and be free to serve God.

Then Jesus takes the coin, and says, 'Whose head is this? The Emperor's? Well, give back it to the Emperor then.' The Greek word he uses does mean, give back - not just give and not just pay up. Give the money back, Jesus says, and be free.

It's remarkable how little politics come into Jesus's life. There's the Emperor ordering all the world to be taxed 30 years before, which means that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, and there's the Jewish King Herod Agrippa executing John the Baptist in Galilee. Apart from that, Jesus's life and ministry have very little to do with secular powers at all. He just gets on with what God wants him to do and takes no notice of kings and emperors.

That's important, I think, because this saying, 'Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's' is often taken to mean that we should be good citizens and live within the rules of our societies, and pay our taxes and so on. If we live in a good and just society, then that's fine, and if we don't, it isn't fine. But either way, I don't think that is what Jesus is talking about here, because he wasn't interested in Emperors or taxes. He's saying, Don't worry about the Emperor. Don't get involved. Give the money back and be free. Then you'll be able to give to God what is God's.

And that's a very different matter, because the Emperor may coin the money, but God made everything. Giving to God what is God's means giving everything to God. Which means you can stop worrying about what to give to the Emperor, because there won't be anything left over from what you've given to God.

The Pharisees said that Jesus was honest - truthful - and this is the truth that he recognizes. The only being to whom we owe anything is the being to whom we owe everything. And, as St. John makes Jesus say in another context (8.32), it is a truth that sets people free.

It's a paradox of Christian life that giving to the Emperor makes you a slave, but giving to God makes you free. Free from the powers of the world, but also free in ourselves. I think it's because when we give everything to God, God gives us back ourselves. Our best selves, the people God made us to be. The whole difference between God and the Emperor is that the Emperor wants what we have, to take it away from us and leave us with nothing, but God wants what we have, to take away what is bad and sad and warped and hurt, and leave us with what is good. God sets us free to live as people were made to live - telling the truth and doing good and not being afraid of anything.

Jesus was so free that that even when he was arrested later in the week, and tried, and executed, he didn't feel the need to argue, or plead for his life. To plead for his life would have been to accept that the Emperor had power over him, and he didn't think the Emperor had any power over him that mattered. To the end, he didn't have a coin or anything else of the Emperor's on him.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also, Jesus said. In the end, it was the Pharisees, with their cautious self-preservation and deals with the Roman authorities, who lost even what they had, and Jesus and his disciples who gained the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen  
Littlemore