

## CONTEXT

The drama in Matthew's Jerusalem is getting more serious. The Pharisees sensed that what Jesus stood for ran directly against what they stood for. The Pharisees derived their power and authority from demanding slavish adherence to the Jewish laws.

Jesus threatened their authority. Who was to be followed?

The religious leaders or this upstart carpenter - this Jesus who seemed to claim authority for himself, even above the law.

In Matthew 21, Jesus had entered Jerusalem as if he were king, with crowds cheering him on. He'd driven the money changers out of the temple almost causing a riot. He'd deflected questions from the Pharisees about where his authority came from. He'd targeted the Pharisees with his parable of the wicked tenants.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were natural enemies but here we see them combining. Jesus is clearly seen as a bigger threat than their own partisan positions. The Pharisees are critical of Rome because they are hanging on to their power as leaders of the Jewish temple. They are experts in knowing how to apply the Scriptures to everyday life.

The link with the Herodians is interesting because it suggests collusion between at least some Pharisees and the supporters of the family and descendants of Herod who were puppet governors of Jewish territories: Herod Antipas in Galilee in the north, and Perea across the Jordan from Jerusalem and Judea, and Philip further north in and beyond Galilee. The Herodians in turn were encumbered with the task of quelling riots and stomping down resentment against Rome.

Here the common interest of the Pharisees and the Herodians brings them together, with the aim of impairing Jesus' authority and crushing his 'Kingdom of God' movement by asking him a politics driven question

*is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not.*

This was a big issue for the Jews. What do you do about Rome, the pagan power, which now controls the promised land. Do you pay taxes to such a regime? Does that not sanction the power?

## THE TAX

The tax they were talking about was what Caesar demanded to support his armies. Every country conquered and subjugated by Rome had to pay this tax. It had to be paid in silver coins called denarii. In ancient times coins were the only form of currency available, making them very valuable. The same coin currency was used across the entire Roman empire.

It is interesting to look at the images we put on our money and the value we assign those images.

When the US dollar was created it contained images of Presidents and the words "In God we trust".

When the Euro was created, they used European architectural time periods – Classical Greece, Romanesque, Gothic, 20<sup>th</sup> century modern – on their bank notes

When Australia changed to decimal currency, we used images of uniquely Australian animals on our coins.

Now I recently had an experience of requiring the right coins. We were visiting Niagara Falls and walked across the bridge from the United States to Canada.

Signs warned us that on the return journey we would have to pay a \$1 toll for crossing the bridge. As we returned we entered the (unmanned) gatehouse to be confronted with several somewhat archaic turnstile machines requiring coins to be inserted. There was no facility for using a credit card and our American hosts looked at each other in horror saying, “But we don’t have any cash!” Fortunately, Graeme was carrying some old American money saved from a trip years previously and he just happened to have four \$1 notes. We put these into equally ancient machines which gave us four quarters and we went on our way.

In Jerusalem, they had the money-changers...

## THE DENARIUS

And the Romans had the denarius.

The coins were made out of flat, round discs, or ‘mints’ of pressed metal. Nowadays the minting process is all done by machines in factories, but the Romans made their minted coins entirely by hand. They were made in a workshop space known as a mint which resembled a blacksmith’s shop. Dies, or heavy stamps made of bronze and iron, were engraved with the details of the coin face, and these had to be pounded onto the flat disc to leave an impression.

Early Roman coins (from the 200s BCE) were made in bronze, but they later evolved to include silver, gold and copper in the coin-making process. The denarius was the most popular and prevalent coin of the Roman Empire, made from pressed silver; it remained in circulation for an astonishing five centuries.

The denarius was made bearing the image of Tiberius Caesar and the words, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus”.

In today's story, the Pharisees and Herodians have come up with a neat ploy to trap Jesus. This is not truth-seeking but trap-making.

The game strategy is

*If you pay the tax you upset the Jewish purists*

*If you don't pay the tax you are into trouble with the Romans.*

When faced with the question of whether it is lawful to pay taxes, Jesus says

*why are you putting me to the test you hypocrites?*

*show me the coin used for the tax.*

Now remember, Jesus had just a few days earlier turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Their job was to turn Roman denarii into shekels which were then used for tithes in the Temple. No idolatrous money of Caesar's in the Temple, right? Only good Jewish shekels!

There was a good reason for this. Jewish law banned any image of a person in the temple, let alone any image of a person claiming to be divine, and here was the hated occupier of Israel claiming divinity on a coin.

The Pharisees co-operated with the Jewish political leaders, the Herodians, by carrying these coins, changing them for other coins in the temple, and enabling the tax to be paid.

Now his questioners are asking

*is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*

In answer, Jesus asks for a coin. Note that Jesus himself did not have such a coin – the denarius ... but one of his questioners obviously did! No wonder he called them hypocrites!

There are only two ways to answer the question about paying taxes

YES or NO

Jesus' simple question was, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

The coin bore an image of Caesar's head along with an imperial inscription claiming that Caesar was divine.

The reply to the question is obviously, "Caesar's."

With one question Jesus had uncovered the fact they were actually the ones who had sold out to the Romans.

By allowing the money changers to exchange shekels and denarii in the Temple, they were the ones who allowed other gods to have authority instead of Yahweh alone!

Now comes Jesus' answer.

*give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.*

In fact there is a further subtlety in the original Greek. It does not merely say "Give," it has Jesus say, "Give back." Give back to Caesar what is legally owed to him – but nothing more!

Jesus does not advocate withholding taxes. He is prepared to pay taxes and to urge his followers to do the same. This does not mean that such a response is always appropriate. There will also be times when it is appropriate to throw tables over and drive out money-changers. And he then adds,

*give to God the things that are God's*

It all comes down to what we mean by 'what is God's.'

This passage exposes the fallacy of trying to divide reality into God's area and other areas. Today's big issues are inseparably bound up with politics and for people of faith it is important to consider all aspects. It's about justice for all.

With the Pharisees, it was the church leadership looking to bolster its authority by using the power of Caesar. The tables in the forecourt were about the amassing of capital and privilege, and not about the healing of people.

God forbid we should be act like that today!

In the words of Yung Suk Kim,

*In the end, what Jesus teaches us is a critical interpretation of the world: fearless determination and conscientious engagement in the world, based on what we believe is true.*

From Matthew's perspective, the goal of life is not merely to defeat the empire or adopt an "all-or-nothing policy, but to love people, including our enemies. Living in society places obligations on people – but they must not confuse those obligations with their obligations to God.

Jesus himself told us:

*love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.*

Bill Loader says it better than I can.

*It all depends on what we mean by 'what is God's. Surely all things are God's! If everything is God's, then in all things we must seek God's will, and that will entail measuring all things, including governments, by the vision Jesus has given us of God's rule or kingdom. God's compassion knows no bounds, so it will always be an irritant to regimes which stifle it and it will stand in conflict with oppressors, whoever and wherever they are.*

Let me end with a poem written for this reading by Rev. Jennie Gordon.

belongs to God

I give to God

the earth beneath my feet, the sky above

the struggle of this fumbling faith unbridled love

the smell of lemon scented gums and ginger cake

the spring of misty morning bread and arms that bake

the blush of brides and flight of birds

and music that I haven't heard

the press of flesh and taste of home

the touch of linen, fresh and warm

the hand that holds each tiny spark  
and lights a candle from the dark  
the tears of life still wet and numb, an orange flower  
the years of edgy, yearning prayer, the pre-dawn hour

the mess of thoughts and smell of dog  
and soft caress of salty fog  
the silky sound of pounding seas  
the verdant pull of mushy peas  
the words that catch each binding fear  
and send them far away from here

I give to God  
the earth beneath my feet, the sky above  
the struggle of this fumbling faith  
unbridled love

AMEN