

Jesus and Roman state power (Mark 12: 13-17)

The Question about Paying Taxes

13 Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ¹⁴And they came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

¹⁵Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.'

¹⁶And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.'¹⁷Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

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Commentary

Implicit in Jesus' Parable of the Wicked Tenants is his charge that the Sanhedrin's authority derives not from God, but from Rome, to whom they have sold out. The question of how to respond to the Roman Occupation now assumes centre stage as the Sanhedrin, frustrated by their fear of the crowd from arresting Jesus (12:12), enlist the help of the Pharisees and the Herodians to trap Jesus. It is a deadly trap, because the issue they choose is the question of the Roman Poll Tax.

The Poll Tax: background

In 6CE Augustus converted Archelaus' failed kingdom into a Roman province, and conducted a census in order to compute the per capita tax that was to be levied on all its subjects. The *kenson* (Greek) or *tributum capitis* (Latin) was valued at a denarius – a day's wages.

The Poll Tax in the time of Jesus

The Poll Tax was a litmus test of how to respond to the Roman Occupation. It divided collaborationists from subversives. Advocating withholding the tax was a capital punishment. The Romans interpreted it as rebellion against the authority of the Emperor (just as the tenants in last week's parable rebelled against the authority of the landlord by refusing to pay him what he was owed).

For collaborationists, paying the tax was either a simple matter of survival or, as in the case of the Pharisees and the Herodians, the price of limited political and religious autonomy.

But the Poll Tax offended the most devout people of Jesus day. Israel had no king other than Yahweh. Jewish people were subject to no other lord. The Poll Tax was thus an abomination because it proclaimed the illegitimate authority (*that* question again!) of the Emperor. For these people, paying the Poll Tax was a denial of Yahweh's lordship. The political revolutionaries and devoutly religious experienced

Rome's illegitimate claim to lordship (authority) through the Poll Tax and expressed resistance and subversion by refusing to pay it.

For Jesus, it was a question of the impact of the tax on the poorest and most vulnerable that connected it to his gospel of the Kingdom of God. For the rich, it was a tax on moveable property. For the poor, who had no such assets, it was a tax literally on their *bodies* – the one thing they owned. Just as all land was held ultimately to belong to the Empire, so were all people. For the poor – many of the crowds from Jerusalem who heard Jesus – the tax was the reminder that they were slaves – body and soul – to the Romans. Those who heard the Good News of the Kingdom were being cruelly reminded that they were *not* free or liberated. Despite all that Jesus claimed about the freedom God offered them, the daily reality was that they belonged to the Emperor, who had the right of life and death over them as his property. The Poll Tax demonstrated that. The tax was a measure of piety, national spirit, integrity, courage ... it was one of *the* questions of the day.

The Poll Tax in the time of Mark

Mark, you will recall, is writing during the Great Revolt. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian writing at that time, one of the principal sparks to the revolt was an increase in imperial taxes that resulted in a backlog of owed taxes. The revolt solved the problem by stopping the payment of tribute. Ched Myers points out that during the revolt, a series of coins for “liberated” Jerusalem were minted and circulated throughout Palestine – a deliberate “icon” to replace the denarius.

Jeremias considers that the refusal to pay taxes during the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 “was considered to be the only cause of the war” – in much the same way that the Brexit vote was considered to be a “referendum on immigration”. Neither is strictly true, but it highlights the political explosiveness of the Poll Tax.

The trap

Both the arena and the subject are carefully chosen to spring the deadly trap. The arena is deliberately public: it is a “winner takes all” competition for the hearts and minds of the people. The winner is the one whose argument is the most convincing, and who avoids being cornered.

The question is designed precisely to corner Jesus. Note the double move of Jesus' questioners to leave him no wriggle room: (1) is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not? (2) Should we pay them, or should we refuse to do so? Jesus must, against the tenor of everything he has preached about the reign of God, acknowledge Caesar's lordship and so discredit himself and his message, or else he must publicly and explicitly state that the tax is illegitimate, for which he could be denounced and condemned. It seems to be a case of “Heads, he loses, tails, he loses!”

The flattery of v16 is important. “Teacher, we know that you are honest. You treat everyone equally, no matter who they are, and you teach the truth about what God requires of people”. The irony is palpable: they start by ascribing to Jesus precisely

the divine authority that they were seeking to discredit. But the flattery ups the stakes. This then is what is at stake for Jesus: if he allows the tax, he will be accused of being false to his own teaching, and saying what he does out of fear. If he disallows it publicly, he is finished.

Jesus' response

Note what Jesus does:

1. He distances himself from the tax. He himself has no denarius. He does not name the coin. He does not pay it. His opponents have to produce the coin – conceding the ground. They are already polluted and compromised by their complicity with the tax. They are shown to have already made their own answer by association.
2. He refuses to recognise the Emperor's lordship – he asks, disingenuously innocently, "Whose head? What inscription?" In effect, Jesus says, "This coin is something I have never come across before, and I have no idea whose image this is or what this inscription says".
3. Jesus emphasises the idolatry of his opponents. The coin has the image of Caesar and the inscription, "August and Divine Son". They have had to produce the coin, gaze at the image, read the inscription and name the emperor. They are hoist on their own petard – collaborators and idolators.
4. The key, though, is Jesus' response. If his opponents have wrong-footed him with the question, Jesus has regained the public ground. But he has still to answer. His response is translated as "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's!" ... Jesus' answer has been interpreted by generations of commentators as the formula for good Christian citizenship: "Pay your taxes and go to church to pray for your government!" But the word can equally and better be translated, "Give back" or "repay". This alters Jesus' meaning significantly.

"Render" or "repay"?

Jesus could not have advocated paying the Poll Tax, whatever he might have said about our modern forms of taxation. It was contrary to everything he preached about the reign of God and human freedom, and to his clear conviction that the earth and its people belong to no one other than God. There is no other Lord – all other seeming-owners are but tenants. Neither can he publicly denounce the Poll Tax without courting martyrdom. So here, by adroitly outmaneuvering his opponents, he is able to say "Here – take this coin which belongs to Caesar and give it back to him. I will have no truck with that idolatrous filth! Get rid of it. Clear Israel of its pollution!"

Yet its ambiguity allows two further interpretations. It allows him to say to his opponents, "You enjoy the fruits of collaboration. You could not be where you are

without colluding with Rome. Therefore it is perfectly just that *you* pay Caesar for the privileges you enjoy. Go and pay Caesar what *you* owe. But remember: you have already failed to pay God what you owe God! You are condemned by your own lights!" And it also evades the trap: after all, Jesus could simply have been saying, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's!" And no one would be able to prove otherwise. No wonder the response leaves his opponents "utterly amazed" (12:17)!

Reading this passage today

Are we to read today's passages as "an example of good Christian citizenship"? Are churches supposed to recognise their governments as part of God's saving plan? Is Christian public living about uncritical, co-operative being-at-home equally in the state and in the church?

Jesus doesn't encourage this reading! Jesus did not amaze the people by neatly and quite obviously doing what any pragmatist might have done – divide up matters of faith and matters of state and assign each their separate sphere. Jesus provokes us to ask critical questions of the state: does it behave like Empire, or look more like the Kingdom? To what extent are our public finances structured according to their effect on the poorest? Is the church "selling its soul to Caesar" for gift-aided tax breaks?

The Jesus we see in this passage is no political street corner revolutionary. Yet he is deeply political and politically astute. He is careful about what he says – yet he is clear that what he says is profoundly subversive. He will not allow any power the role that belongs only to God. His vision of the Kingdom is of a world that belongs to God – a God who wills Life and salvation. No other power may hold a child of God in slavery. And the children of God are those made in God's image – those whose bodies bear the mark and therefore the lordship of God! The only power he will allow wielded over them is the power of God at work in and through him – Spirit, life, and resurrection.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 12: 13-17)

Doubt about the world is a necessary condition to joining the struggle to transform it. To that end, Jesus practiced what the modern popular educator Paulo Freire calls "conscientization." Freire believes that there are two fundamental approaches to education. The first is the banking method, which assumes that the teacher has all the essential information to deposit in the pupil, who is an empty vessel to be filled up with knowledge.

In the other approach, the teacher provides a framework for thinking, for creative and active engagement around questions that are a part of the real-life context of the pupil, who actively engages in the process of learning. The teacher, who also learns, raises questions like who, what, why, and how. A good teacher, according to

Freire, would much rather help students learn how to ask the right questions than give them the answers. Literacy is more than the ability to read and write. It is the ability to interpret the world, to bring critical questions to bear on the social context of one's life. Questioning may be the most basic tool we need for the discipleship task of social transformation.

Those in power do not like to be questioned. In this reading Jesus is "speaking truth to power". Jesus is asking the right questions. Asking the right question has always served the cause of righteousness. The very fact that power is challenged makes for more healthy human equations. Some of the questions we might pose to our world:

- If communism has been defeated by a better economic system, capitalism, why is there not a noticeable improvement in quality of life throughout the world?
- Who gives certain countries the right to "police" the globe?
- Why are powerful countries dismissive of the United Nations?
- Why are more and more women and children living in poverty?
- How do we account for the growing gap in Britain between very wealthy people and those with moderate incomes? And how do we account for the continued increase in domestic poverty?
- With Britain facing such financial difficulties, why is spending on military personnel and weapons not cut severely?
- Why is there such disproportion among our school systems, even in the same city or region?
- Why do so many of our churches simply mirror the dominant culture?
- Why is it that the overriding agenda of the institutional churches appears to be self-preservation?

Just as Jesus questions the world, so does he question us. Perhaps because we have eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear, his questions open up painful and awkward uncertainties. In Mark's gospel, we encounter a Jesus who is portrayed not as the answer to our questions, but as the question to our answers.

All age worship ideas (Mark 12: 13-17)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

At the end of Mark 11 the religious folk are trying to trip Jesus up over the issue of his authority. He wrong foots them by asking them a question about John the Baptist. Here again they try to trip him up over the issue of tax – something they

would rather not be paying to Rome. They test him to see if he will pit his authority in the civil arena against Rome. Again Jesus wrong foots his challengers by reducing the authority of Caesar to a single denarius. The coin bears his image so it must belong to him therefore it is right to pay it back. Jesus, along with those who accuse him, bear the image of the creator God but in rejecting the one who is sent by God they are holding back from paying what is owed to God – their very lives.

Whether we agree with it or not we are probably law-abiding citizens who pay taxes and do what is expected of us – we may moan or grumble about how much we pay but we do it. Likewise with the law of the land – we may occasionally go over a speed limit or illegally download a movie but overall we no doubt acknowledge the parameters of the legal system in this country and respect them.

The sovereignty of Caesar is limited but the sovereignty of God is eternal and worked out through the kingdom of Jesus. If God's sovereignty over us is about life in that kingdom then why did the religious folk, and we today, resist?

The #MeToo and #HeForShe campaigns have been high profile acknowledgements that for too long the inequality experienced by women has been largely ignored by those with power to change the systems that allow such injustice. At the root of these campaigns is the recognition that the value, gifts and contribution of women is at the very least equal to that of men.

Women are not the only people who have suffered under the imbalance of such inequality. There are many groups of people who are not treated well through no fault of their own but simply because some in power refuse to acknowledge their worth and find it more lucrative to enforce or encourage ongoing oppression.

The comparison culture we live in suggests that some 'images' are better than others – that the look of some people is more favourable but this comparison is also one of the most destructive forces in our culture with eating disorders, so-called body 'enhancements' and self-harm on the rise. Of course this isn't just an issue of aesthetics but also about the way our culture idolizes certain roles or ambitions above others that cause people to have low self-esteem, depression or worse simply because they do not match up to what is perceived 'the norm'. The church is certainly not immune to this – I remember trying to reason with someone who could not shake the idea of there being 'Super' Christians in the church who they could never match up to.

Ideas: Have a series of images of different peoples faces. Try and make this as diverse as possible. If possible put in some faces of people whose job might come as a surprise – Nadia Bolz-Weber for instance is a Lutheran Pastor but her image might surprise people. Ask people to think about who they are most drawn to and who they are least drawn to. Who has the most trustworthy face, or the least trustworthy?

People need not share their thoughts but the idea of this is to try and help people

recognize that we are reminded that the image or imprint of God is in each of us. That means understanding the value God has put in us and encouraging us to see the value in one another. 'Paying back' to God is to offer ourselves in whole-life discipleship – but it is also valuing what God values – those who feel least valued, respected or equal.

Prayer: A week or two before you could invite people to bring in photos of themselves and make up a collage – or if you have the technology take everyone's photo and create your own digital collage. This could be the focus of responsive prayers – offering not just an image but our whole lives to God who has imprinted upon us.

Around you could have cards highlighting the groups of people who are 'undervalued' by society today and pray that they might know their God-given worth and the abundant life that Jesus has secured for them.

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 12: 13-17)

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

Lighting of the Candles

We light a candle in the name of the Maker,

Who lit the world and breathed the breath of life for us...

We light a candle in the name of the Son,

Who saved the world and stretched out his hand to us...

We light a candle in the name of the Spirit,

Who encompasses the world and blesses our souls with yearning...

We light three lights for the trinity of love:

God above us, God beside us, God beneath us:

The beginning, the end, the everlasting one.

Silence (1 min) to confess our sins and still our hearts

Liturgy

Father God at work around us:

Thank you for your redemptive work: saving and reconciling

Thank you for your creative work: fashioning and beautifying

Father God at work around us:

Thank you for your providential work: supplying and sustaining

Thank you for your justice work: defending and advocating

Father God at work around us:

Thank you for your compassionate work: comforting, healing & guiding

Thank you for your revelatory work: enlightening with truth

Father God at work around us

Apprentice us in your ways

For your glory and the flourishing of all that you have made.

Amen.

(You like me might be inclined to change gender terms for God, so you could use Mother God or maybe make up your own what about Uncontrollable God !!)

Prayers

Creator God like Anna who waited to greet the Christ child

Show us where you are at work in the world.

Like Bezalel, anointed as an artist in the temple

Equip us with skills to glorify you.

Like Samuel who sat up at the sound of your voice

Help us to respond to your call on our lives.

Like Daniel who refused to eat food that was tainted

Give us courage to be faithful to you in our world.

Like Lydia, a worshipper as well as a business woman

Help us to put you first in our lives.

Like Jesus, your son, our teacher and example

Help us to worship you in all that we do.

Amen.

<https://christspieces.org/2016/01/12/liturgy-kingdom-calling/>