

Sunday 18 October 2020  
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison  
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

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**Opening Prayer:**

Holy God,  
you have made us in your image,  
and we belong to you alone.  
Therefore we offer ourselves to you,  
in service, love, and praise.  
Use us for the glory of your realm  
and the good of your people;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*(FOW Worship)*

**A Reading from Holy Scripture:**

**Matthew 22:15-22     Paying Taxes to Caesar**

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. <sup>16</sup> And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin for the tax. "And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" <sup>21</sup> They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>22</sup> When they heard it, they marvelled. And they left him and went away. *(ESVUK)*

## Sermon:

Over the last few weeks we have taken a look at those passages in the Bible, which tell us what happened when Jesus entered Jerusalem, we saw how he had been enthusiastically welcomed by the people, but not so by the religious authorities.

We saw Him in the Temple casting out the profiteers, that is the moneychangers and traders, telling them that the Temple was meant to be a house of prayer, but that they had made it into a den of robbers.

We saw how when He returned the following day to teach in the Temple, the Chief Priests challenged him to prove where He got His authority to do such things. And we saw Jesus replying with three parables; the first about two sons, one obedient the other disobedient, the second about wicked tenants, who would not give the Landowner what was rightfully his, and had killed his messengers and even his son and the third parable was that of the Wedding Feast.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast tells of how those whom the King had invited to his son's wedding slighted him by ignoring the invitation. It tells of how the King punished them and opened the invitation to strangers.

It is clear to us as we read these three parables that they were directed at the religious leaders and it obvious by their reaction that this was clear to them. The three parables illustrate how the religious leaders had led God's Chosen people further and further away from God.

The Chief Priests and other religious leaders understood that Jesus was accusing them but they were entrenched in their obduracy;

stubborn to the last they would resist the teachings of the Son of God (the very Messiah they were supposed to be waiting for), thinking Him to be a dangerous and deluded upstart.

Having been challenged by Jesus and been publicly accused of leading God's people astray, they sought to save face. Their pride had been damaged, they could not allow an uneducated carpenter humiliate the appointed leaders of the people.

They saw what Jesus did as an attack on the very fabric of Jewish life and society, attacking the religious leaders was in their view tantamount to attacking God Himself.

No doubt they thought that this Jesus fellow would have to be dealt with.

To that end, the religious authorities go into council; they constitute a meeting with the sole purpose of working out what do with Jesus. Can you imagine the discussion as they came up with different possible solutions to the Jesus Question? 'Perhaps we can get Him to say something publicly that would incriminate Him and possibly even condemn Him?'

And so we see these 'holy' men, scheming and plotting with murderous intent in the kind of secret meeting that is more often associated with gangsters, than with honest and upright men.

In their desire to be rid of Jesus the religious leaders were more like the Mafia than men of God. And so the religious elite of Jewish society conspires and connives a devious plan to 'sort out this upstart.' But, they were not going to do the deed themselves, no, they would not think such action worthy of them, they will get others to do their dirty work.

They send their 'junior' disciples and some members of the political party, the Herodians, to Jesus (See here how the Religious and Political leaders worked together in their attempt to get rid of Jesus; for even wicked and selfish people will compromise with sworn enemies if it is in their common evil interest).

What were these junior Pharisees and Herodians to say to Jesus? How were they to strike the blow that would bring Him down?

Well, they begin with flattery, a tactic so often used by the insincere. They begin,

"Teacher we know that you are true (did they? If they did why did they not believe Him?) And teach the way of God truthfully." (Did they know the way of God?). They go on,

"And you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances".

Do you see how they are trying to pull Jesus in by appealing to what they thought was important to all, namely, Pride?

"Surely you are not afraid of any man, you will speak your mind."

They foolishly thought that Jesus was proud like them and that His pride would force Him to agree with them and then rush headlong into saying something that would incriminate Him.

They were judging the Messiah, the very Son of God, God Himself, by their own pathetic and sinful standards.

Thinking that they had sufficiently disarmed Jesus by their clever flattery they then ask what they think is the killer question,

"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" You can almost hear them say to themselves 'Ha! Get out of that if you can!'

Matthew tells us that Jesus is aware of their malice, or depravity, which is another possible translation of the word used.

Why was the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" such a dangerous question to answer?

Well we must remember that Palestine at this time was under the rule of the Roman Empire and the Jews were subject to it, understandably they hated this state of affairs, so the question might be put another way, 'Should we the Jews, pay tribute to the hated Romans?'

Historians tell us that there were various taxes imposed by the Romans: there was a ground tax, paid partly by what a family produced by way of crops and partly in money, there was income tax which was a percentage of a person's income and there was a poll tax (Tributum Capitis) paid by every adult.

The Poll Tax in Palestine was possibly a Denarius, which was the equivalent of just over a day's wages for a labourer. The Denarius used to pay this tax became known as the Tribute Coin (for obvious reasons: see above). It was not only a way of raising large sums of money for Rome, it was also a way of keeping tabs on the size of the population and reminding the people of who was their overlord.

Taxation is an emotive subject even in our modern society. When the UK Government introduced the Poll Tax there was widespread rioting.

Responsible governments are always looking for new ways of funding those things that society needs to function well, security, health, education, welfare and etc.

But Tribute was different, it was a reminder that those who paid it were subjugated and the image of the Emperor, which was imprinted upon the coin, reminded them that they owed obedience to him.

For the Jews, (and probably for many other peoples) the knowledge that Caesar ruled their land was deeply offensive. Their society was Theocratic, God was considered their King and to pay Tribute to an earthly king especially a Gentile king was considered an insult to God.

There were fanatical Jews of the time who insisted that to pay taxes to a foreign king was wrong.

So here we have the essence of the trap that was laid before Jesus. If Jesus said it was wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, the religious leaders would report him, to the Roman authorities, who would then probably arrest Jesus as an agitator and a rebel.

If on the other hand Jesus was to say that it was acceptable to pay taxes to the Romans then he would have been viewed by His people as a Roman sympathiser and they would have rounded on Him (and if you think that is not a real threat, just think of what happened after the second world War, to those in France and even in Jersey who were thought to have sympathies with the Nazis).

They did eventually round on Jesus, but this was not the moment that God had appointed, for there were things that the Lord still had to do and teach.

At this point we ought to take note that the Pharisees were the ultra orthodox Jews who resented taxes to a foreign power and the Herodians were a political party who supported Herod, the puppet King of Galilee who did the Romans bidding in raising taxes. Now these two opposing groups had united in their common hatred of Jesus.

Jesus knew their hypocrisy and He asks them to show them the Tribute Coin, the Denarius, (Notice Jesus does not have one to hold up) when they show Him the coin He asks them,

“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

As in modern times so it was in the ancient world, indeed more so, Coins were used as sign of Kingship, power, and rule.

What better advertising can there be? Ones image on the very thing that everyone needs and desires, the very thing that oils the wheels of society. Whoever has their image on the coin of the realm is the one at the top of that realm. To deface such a coin is to incur penalty.

The answer to Jesus' question, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” was obvious, Caesars image was on the coin.

“Well then”, said Jesus, ‘give to Caesar what belongs to him and give to God what belongs to Him.”

Once again Jesus confounds those who sought to outwit Him and at the same time lays down teaching that applies for all time.

The Christian is a citizen of two Kingdoms. We belong to an earthly ‘kingdom’ or Rule and we owe a debt of obligation to that Kingdom as it seeks to fulfil its responsibilities to the people of that Kingdom. This means that the Christian must be a responsible citizen in keeping with his or her Christian duty. We must bring Christian attitudes and characteristics to influence our government and society.

But the Christian is also a citizen of that Heavenly Kingdom, and there are responsibilities to the Sovereign of that Kingdom, to which all other kingdoms are subject. To this King must be our prime obedience and responsibility.

Now by and large, our responsibilities to the state and our responsibilities to Heaven do not clash (at least in this country), but when they do, as they have done on many occasions throughout history and still do today for Christians in many places in the world, then the Christian must make a stand and that stand must be firmly on the side of God's Kingdom.

Jesus was telling everyone that though there are earthly rulers who lord it over us and we must do what we can to obey them, that God is ruler of all, there is no king or ruler greater than He, that everyone and everything is subject to Him and it is to Him that all will bow the knee even the mighty Caesar. Amen.



## Prayers of Intercession:

*[Silence may follow each of the petitions.]*

Loving God, you are steadfast, forever enfolding  
even when we cannot accept ourselves.

May your Spirit empower us to imitate you:  
by receiving those who feel judged and rejected,  
by walking alongside those who despair,  
by encouraging those who tend to the broken,  
by affirming those who labour in love.

We lift into your tender care  
those whose bodies, minds, or spirits have been  
weakened or crushed.

We lift up to your compassionate grace  
those whose burdens, guilt, or fears seem too massive to bear.

We lift before your gracious mercy  
those whose who have given in to hatred, rage, or vengeance .

We lift into your loving kindness all those who are dear to us.....

Receive all these cares, loving God,  
and fill us with the light of Christ,  
through the work of your Spirit. **Amen.**

*(FOW worship)*

## **Commemoration of the Faithful Departed**

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the Church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

## **The Lord's Prayer**

OUR Father which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:  
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
For ever. Amen.

## **The Blessing**

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!