

**17th Sunday after Trinity
2011**

+Where would our clever political interviewers and lawyers be without the “impossible” question? The question that can’t be answered in the “yes or no” way it’s asked. The question so tricky that however you answer it you’re going to end up giving the wrong impression or getting into trouble with someone or other.

So the best brains among Jesus’ critics think they’ve thought up a guaranteed winner when they ask Jesus whether it is right to pay taxes to the Emperor. The Pharisees and the Herodians know what they are up to; this is no innocent question coming from any desire to know the answer. They just want to cast Jesus in a bad light.

If he says that it is quite OK to pay taxes to Caesar it will upset the purists and hotheads who claimed that having anything to do with Romans was an act of treachery and betrayal.

If Jesus says it’s wrong to pay taxes he will be close to committing an act of treason against the state – and the loyal Herodians – themselves loyal to the ruler the Romans are happy to see in power – will be there as witnesses to his treasonable words.

Of course, Jesus is one step ahead of them. He knows this is a trap; he knows that those who pose the tricky question aren’t actually interested in the answer anyway. That’s why he calls them hypocrites.

I suppose Jesus could simply have refused to play and so avoided the risks of providing an answer. But as is so often the way with God, Jesus takes the situation he finds and turns it to good. In this case he sees the trap and drops the Pharisees into it.

So, any coin bearing the monarch’s head belongs ultimately to the monarch. It not only bears his image it carries his name so it must belong to him. If Caesar wants some of his money back, as it were, then we have no

alternative but to give him what is his in any case. Simple says Jesus – just get on with it.

And then he goes one step further. While you're getting your priorities sorted out you might want to give to God the things that belong to God. Jesus points out to the crowd that these supposed religious perfectionists had forgotten about the God they claimed to understand and to whom they claimed to owe such perfect loyalty.

Off they go – thunderstruck and, no doubt, grinding their teeth.

This story, which you will also find in Luke and Mark's gospels, has often been used to illustrate the ideal relationship between Church and state. Either the Church does its stuff and doesn't interfere in politics or that the state has a right to expect its Christian citizens to obey it in matters directly concerned with religion.

Whichever way you take such an argument I believe it is fundamentally a misinterpretation of what Jesus was trying to say.

In truth Jesus doesn't show much if any interest in the politics of his day but that shows his perspective on the world. He doesn't seek one form or colour of politics - he simply expects to see justice and equity in accordance with his father's wishes and design.

I imagine the look of a coin or its ownership is pretty much irrelevant. What is more interesting in fact is the spin Jesus introduces to the question by mentioning God and what belong to him.

So let's revisit Jesus' words and do so as though we were reading Matthew's gospel in the Greek it was first written in. The language used in the New Testament Greek of 1st Century doesn't talk about the "head" of Caesar but the "image" of Caesar. To

translate it even more literally the word is “Eikon”. Whose image, whose eikon is on the coin?

But what starts like this as a vivid piece of ancient writing becomes more powerful as Jesus turns to the Pharisees and the rest of crowd. To paraphrase the meaning Jesus is saying to his listeners – if it bears Caesar’s image then the coin belongs to Caesar but you, and every human being bear another image, another eikon, the image of God.

Unlike the coin they do not belong to the Emperor. Pay your taxes by all means but that doesn’t make you Caesar’s possession. You belong to God – and so does Caesar!

When we read the passage in this way you can see that Jesus isn’t somehow parcelling out the world into what belong to the state and what belongs to God. He is showing how God actually trumps everything by being the true ruler – the one to whom everything is owed. Put another way, the responsibilities and

duties we sense as Christians here in church don’t actually change when we go into the voting booth.

In this world that coin might belong to the Emperor, to the Queen – but it doesn’t alter the reality that ultimately all belongs to and is paid to God.

On the one hand this passage doesn’t give us a clear answer to the questions that have exercised many people: The nature and purpose of taxation, the duty of the individual to the state and such matters as compulsory military service.

But on the other hand it stands as a corrective to any state or ruler claiming that the human being has no other responsibility except to the state and that all obedience is owed to the state.

Maybe it’s no chance that the truly brutal regimes of the last century haven’t been Christian monarchies but Godless republics.

Forget or repudiate what we owe to God and maybe we begin to lose sight of what we owe to each other. If we deny the divine image contained equally in all of us we begin to make one another less than human.

Pay your taxes, engage in political debate and action – all these things are part of our human responsibility – but never lose sight of the fact that even our enemies bear the image of God and that, in the end, everything will have to be given back to him.

Amen