

## Reflection: Give to God the things that are God's

David Fotheringham, 18 October 2020

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**Bible readings:** Matthew 22: 15-22

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts bring you joy, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

This wonderful little story is at first glance a very amusing story about a serious trap set by Jesus' opponents – or, if not opponents, certainly people who wanted to test Jesus' credentials in a very partisan way. The Jewish people were under foreign rule. They had lived in that land for thousands of years, admittedly after moving in on the land's previous inhabitants. However, at the time of Christ, the Romans had taken control of them and were happily extracting tax from them, with the people having little control over what was done with those taxes. And as we see in other stories in the gospels, the tax collectors were despised for their collaboration with Rome.

However, of course, there were still different views about the government. On the positive side, the Romans provided a level of protection. Paying the taxes kept the government happy and quiet, and there were plenty of people in the middle and upper classes who would have benefitted from having a favourable relationship with the Roman government. In this story, come even get the name "Herodians", owing to their support of Herod. Overall there would have been a whole spectrum of opinions about the Roman Government, as you would expect.

In Australia, there is a similar spectrum of opinions among Indigenous people regarding our Government, from those who support and participate actively in it, to those who are deeply opposed to actions like the Northern Territory Intervention and find little redeeming in the Government. This is part of what makes the Uluru Statement from the Heart so remarkable, in actively bridging that spectrum.

Jesus also faced a spectrum like that when he was asked about the taxes. The question to Jesus was also complicated by the fact that the Roman emperor forced the people to use coins bearing his image, and most likely also bearing words that proclaimed the emperor's divinity. As such, to some even handling these coins was distasteful at best, and blasphemous at worst. The question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor", referring to the Jewish law, keeps that religious issue in play. So, if Jesus says "Yes, it is lawful", he will alienate a whole lot of people who feel the worst of the Roman oppression, and his commitment to the commandments against worshiping only God, and not images, will come into question. On the other hand, if Jesus says "No, it is not lawful", he will please the more rebellious and the more self-righteous among them, but will be immediately labelled as seditious and become nothing more than a zealous rebel, handed over to Rome quick-smart.

In some ways, Jesus evades the direct question. In doing so, though, he draws attention to the bigger picture, and forces us to attend to the question of the relationship between our obedience to the state and our obedience to God. Jesus doesn't answer for what is right in every given situation, but he draws our attention to the bigger picture, to the image of God in creation which is so much more significant than the image of Caesar on a coin. And when we say "the image of God in creation" we remember the words in Genesis about how when God created humankind, "in the image of God he created them, male and female God created them."

But enough preamble: I want to take you into this scene, this morning, so that you can hear the question in this for you. We're going to enter this passage a bit more deeply. We'll take a different approach than usual, today. I'm going to invite you into the passage a bit more personally. I want to invite you to close your eyes, if you're willing, and imagine that you are there, in the temple, when this question and answer happens. Imagine the scene – Jesus is there, and some disciples, and a crowd of curious people, some more obviously religious than others. You are there.

In the crowd, do you identify with those who would defy the government? Do you identify with those who would defend the government? Do you identify with those who would defend the purity of faith? Notice people with these different positions in the crowd, as someone asks Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay tax to the Emperor?" See Jesus asking for a coin. How does he hold it? What is his expression? Imagine that he catches your eye, and listen to his tone of voice when he says, "Give to the Emperor the things are the Emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's." What do you feel when you hear those words? Is he asking something of you?

Take a moment to speak with him about your thoughts, your fears, and the grace you need from him, to follow him well in your life.