

# GIVE UNTO CAESAR

Mt.22:15-22; 1Th.1:1-10

*Father God, as we reflect on your word together, we pray that you might meet each one of us in this moment and help us to hear your guidance for our lives. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen*

When I was eight, I won a school prize: it was for “tenacity contributing to an outstanding position in the year group”. I was proud, but didn’t understand what tenacity meant. I looked it up in the dictionary and learnt that it was about being very determined.

Tenacity is a difficult skill to learn: it usually grows by watching other people’s example and learning from them. One example comes from the Jewish Leaders in our Gospel reading who are determined in their efforts to catch Jesus out and discredit him as a religious teacher. In fact their tenacity is only surpassed by their inability to recognise that Jesus will never be caught out by their efforts.

Imagine the scene. Having failed earlier to expose Jesus through questions about his authority the Jewish leaders disguise their next trap by sending others to ask a seemingly straightforward question. Their question on taxes, which even divided the various Jewish groups, seeks a Yes/No answer. Either response would reflect badly on Jesus. If he answers “Yes” he is suggesting that the Jewish people - God’s chosen people - were enslaved to God-dishonouring pagan invaders. That answer would have been deeply offensive to the Jewish general public. But if he answered “No”, it would have been seen as committing treason by the Roman authorities.

But Jesus won’t be trapped like this and asks one of his questioners for a denarius - the coin used to pay tax. It was a coin that was covered with words that were offensive to the Jews: on one side was the image of Tiberius Caesar was marked “son of the divine Augustus”, whilst on the reverse it was marked “Pontifex Maximus”, which Jews would interpret as “High Priest”. Jesus questions them on the coin to check they recognise the images and then makes a masterly response:

‘So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’

Superficially, Jesus’s answer matches with the Jewish teaching from Daniel 2 that people ought to pay taxes to the foreign overlord as he owed his position to God. However, the response neatly side-steps the fact that Daniel’s words comes from the time of exile when the Jews recognised the imposition of a pagan overlord was God’s judgment - a situation that did not apply to how the Jewish leaders felt about Caesar. Instead, as the Easter story shows, an uneasy political relationship had developed between the Jewish religious establishment and the Romans. When it suited them, the Jewish Leaders were quite happy to draw on the political, financial and military resources of the invaders they despised. This relationship was a convenient liaison entirely divorced from scriptural teaching. The possession of that coin by a seemingly devout Jew is a symbol of that inappropriate alliance. With that in mind, listen again to Jesus’ response:

‘So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’

There is a clear underlying message: the coin bears Caesar’s image: give it back to him. You bear God’s image: so give yourself back to him!

That’s a really profound challenge, so it’s hardly a surprise that we read that the questioners went away amazed.

I'd offer that this challenge is at the centre of what it means to live out our faith in a world that has very different perspectives. There are likely to have been times when each of us have felt as if we are the rope in a game of tug-of-war as the various forces of home, work, family and community all demand more than their share of us and our resources. Do we respond to these demands by satisfying the person who shouts loudest, or by progressing a shared objective, or by recognising the most pressing, unselfish need.

That pressing need - the place where God needs us to be - may not be shouting for our attention. In fact, my experience is that God seldom forces Himself upon us: we are meant to seek Him, to reflect on His will before acting unrelentingly to achieve it. That is a very different approach from self-interest demonstrated by the world today and by the Jewish leaders in our Gospel reading.

Instead we are offered a foundation through faith on which we can grow. St Paul, writing in his first letter to the Thessalonians, expresses how he has observed the effect of living that way. Paul writes:

- How the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son to return.
- How their missionary work, their acts of goodness to others and loyalty in the face of persecution were all produced as a direct consequence of their faith,
- How their love for Christ inspires their self-sacrifice for others
- How their hope in Christ helped them to keep on going in tough times.

In short, their faith, hope and love towards Christ has been given back to God and this simple act has brought huge results in their own lives as well as the people that surround them.

And the same is true for us too. When we do give ourselves without reserve to the God who gave us everything and formed us in his own image, and when we set out to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to give God what is God's, then we have within ourselves a spring of action that is always questing, always seeking integrity in a world of compromise.

The challenge for each of us is simple: everyday and in every action remember that God is at the centre of all. That doesn't mean that our faith is all we think about, but that our faith is central to all:

- We work hard to meet the needs of the organisations we are part of, but that work is inspired by all that God has made us to be and must always honour His chosen ways;
- We value others, support them and show them love - perhaps more love than they deserve - because this honours the God who values us and has given us more love and forgiveness than we could ever deserve;
- We remember the hope that comes from Christ's death for us - and demonstrate that hope through our perseverance and loyalty to God, however tough our day has been.

It sounds so easy to do this, but it requires tenacity of purpose to succeed. And that tenacity must be driven by our desire rather than a sense of obligation.

And this is much more than just our individual efforts. Collectively - as the people of God - we have a responsibility to join together in the name of the Church to demonstrate what love, faith and endurance can achieve when it is guided by God. The Thessalonians achieved great things for the area collectively, rather than individually. We must do the same if we are to tackle the big issues plaguing the modern world.

Today is Anti-Slavery Sunday. Slavery is one of those big issues that seems too big to tackle alone. It may seem remote but it isn't: there have been 14 cases reported around the Forest between February and May this year. That's 14 people forced against their will into sexual exploitation, drug distribution and immigration crime. And there's many more people affected when you add in the surrounding areas like Southampton, Bournemouth and beyond. Collectively the Church, led by Bishop Tim, wants to respond. As yet, we don't know how. But that response will be formed. It will demonstrate what happens when you, I and others give back to God's purposes through our love, faith and endurance. I urge you to find out more and become involved using the website address shown.

Responding to modern slavery is just one way of being like the Thessalonians and continuing God's work. In the frantic pace of everyday life, it is easy, understandable and wrong to look at things from the world's viewpoint: to be swept along with the tide, claiming credit when things go the way we want and blaming others when our values are violated. Instead it is more correct to look back and recognise how God has shaped us for this moment, then give thanks and commit ourselves ever deeper to him and championing His ways for living. Remember - we are giving ourselves back to God's work as people made in His image, with His concerns.

In fact, if I were to talk to my eight-year-old self receiving that prize for tenacity, I'd say "Well done, now how much of that book token really belongs to God?"

Amen.

*Closing Prayer: Lord, Thank you for making each of us in Your image. Help us to recognise Your concerns and - inspired by our faith - work for the causes and situations that break Your heart with love and endurance. Amen*