

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Give God what is God's

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Sunday 23rd September 2012

Mark 12:1-27

Isaiah 5:1-7

Here is a coin. You won't be able to see the details on it from where you are, but you probably know what it says: you will have read your coins before. All our coins say on one side how much they are worth - 1 penny, twenty pence, one pound, etc. - and on the other side, they read "Elizabeth II D.G. Reg. F. D." This is written around an image of the queen's head. What does it mean? It stands for "Elizabeth the second, by the grace of God, Queen, defender of the faith." Quite a lot that you can get onto something the size of a penny!

On the Denarius, the coin that Jesus asked to see when he was asked about taxes, there was a picture of the emperor Tiberius, staring out coldly. Around the head, in Latin were the words, "Tiberius son of the divine Augustus." On the other side of the coin were the words "High Priest" It was amazing how much the Romans could get on a small coin as well, how much that was very offensive to the Jews! Indeed if the coin had been designed with offending the Jews in mind - which it was not - then the Roman craftsmen could not have done a better job.

Jesus, remember, is in the temple when he has the conversations which we read this morning. He was being asked what were supposed to be hard questions by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. And he was not giving an inch. First, as we read last week, he answered their questions with another question of his own - just as a wily politician today might do. Then he launched into a parable. Some of Jesus' parables were difficult for his hearers to understand. The first parable that Mark records - the parable of the sower - requires an explanation as long as the story itself. But this is not like that. This is a story, an allegory, which Jesus' hearers can understand only too well.

They knew the song of Isaiah about God and Israel, his vineyard. The vineyard which did not yield the expected fruit, even though the owner did all the right things. Jesus' parable turned that song on its head and now the vineyard is bearing fruit, but the owner and his rights are not being acknowledged. This parable was being told as they were standing in the temple, where the doorways were finished by the all-important, but elsewhere unfitting cap stones. They knew that Jesus was saying that things and people they thought didn't fit - he himself, for instance, or the Gentiles whose court he had so vigorously cleansed - were going to turn out to be more important than they thought.

They knew that he was telling the parable against them, against their authority, against their doings. If it weren't for the crowd, what we know as Good Friday might well have become Good Tuesday. But the chief priests were afraid of the crowd, and the crowd were not yet alienated, had not yet forgotten the hope and enthusiasm of Palm Sunday. So they went away.

But they hadn't finished. They sent other people to him, Pharisees and some Herodians, and they came to ask about taxes, the poll tax in particular. Taxation is always a vexing subject. We none of us like to see our money disappearing into the government's coffers, even though we also like to use the roads, schools, libraries, street-lighting, rubbish collection and so on that our taxes do pay for. Still, we often may suspect that if we were in charge of how to spend that money we would do it better and fairer.

That wasn't the only, or main problem for the Jews with their Roman taxes. The very coins were problematical. They looked at the coin issued by Rome, and they shuddered. Indeed many devout Jews tried to avoid handling or even looking at such coins. They could use their own coinage to pay so long as payment was made. Why was it so offensive? Firstly it had a picture of a human head on it. Jews might and did discuss whether the second commandment, about not making images, extended to pictorial representations of flowers or animals, but they all agreed that it definitely included human forms. Mankind was made in the image of God and so you might not represent humanity, lest you be thought to be trying to represent God himself.

Then the coins said that this Tiberius was the son of a god - the "divine Augustus", and that he was a high priest. For Mark's readers, when they picture Jesus, who they know to be the Son of God, standing in the temple which is ruled by the Jewish chief priest, the irony could hardly have been sharper.

The Pharisees, or those who sent them, must have thought that they had come up with a winning question. If Jesus said that the tax should be paid, then the people, who hated it, would turn against him. If he said it should not be paid, then they could report him to Pilate for sedition. Jesus' answer has often been misunderstood, or used to further political

ends. He said to give Caesar what is his and God what is his. So, many have said, he was dividing the religious from the political. He was making two strata of life and telling us to live appropriately in each one.

But was he? Two hundred years before Jesus, Israel had been in the grip of the Maccabean revolts. The Maccabees, who were to win back Israel from their Syrian overlords, had a slogan, which ran, "Pay back the Gentiles what they deserve - and obey the commands of the Law!" What they meant, of course, was to give to the Gentiles as good as they got - vengeance for the years of oppression: repayment in kind for the violence the Gentiles had used against them.

Jesus' words echo this slogan. He is not giving a timeless ethical ruling which settles once and for all the relationship between church and state. He is speaking very cleverly. Give Caesar what is his, could well be argued to mean that one should pay the tax. It certainly can't be reported as sedition. But with the echo of the Maccabean slogan in their minds, those who were opposed to the tax could just as well interpret it as meaning to pay Caesar back in his own coin - i.e. with violent resistance. Or it could mean, take this heretical coinage and throw it back in Caesar's face. Have nothing to do with it. So Romans, legalists and revolutionaries could be appeased by this part of Jesus' answer.

But what of the second part - to give God what belongs to God?

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is about giving God what is God's, or about how the Jewish leaders have not been giving God what is God's. They had been serving God - working the vineyard - for their own ends, their own prestige and riches. They were supposed to give the owner - God - the harvest and let him then pay them, give them what they needed and deserved (and when we do this, God always gives more than we need and certainly more than we deserve). But they didn't.

Instead they asked about the hated coins, bearing the image of the hated emperor. But Jesus said give God what is God's. If the emperor could have his own money back, because it bore his image, what is it that bears the image of God? That was an easy question to anyone who objected to a human image on a coin. Humanity is what and who bears the image of God. Was Jesus hinting that because all people bear God's image, are made in God's image, then all people owe God themselves, their very lives, and should give those lives back in worship and service?

Did he mean that we should give our intelligence, our thought and our concentration? What Jesus objected to in the question of the Sadducees, who came to try their hand at outmanoeuvring him in argument, was that they didn't apply their minds to what they read in Scripture. They had a fixed idea about what they would find in the Bible, and so they did find it there. People who approach the bible that way usually do find what they want. If you look for exclusivity, you will find it. If you search for inclusivity, it's there as well. If you want to find that your people alone are special - whether it is your people in race or in outlook - you will find it. But if you look you will also find that to God all people are special. The Sadducees wanted to find no evidence for the popular belief in life after death at a general resurrection. But Jesus says that they have not looked at Scripture with their intelligence switched on. If we are to give ourselves to God, it includes using the gifts he has given us, and being prepared to give up our preconceptions.

Maybe Jesus, standing in the temple, was also making a point about the way that Jews worshipped: coming to make sacrifice. Maybe he was saying that this duty of worship should be superseded by a more complete worship. Maybe he was even hinting that if you gave God what was God's then you would find that giving Caesar what was his would turn out not to mean meeting violence with violence and hatred with hatred.

The tenants in Jesus' story were violent and unrepentantly greedy. They were made violent by their greed, their desire to possess what was not theirs. The messengers of the owner, and ultimately his son, endured difficult receptions, at best, because of the over-riding desire the tenants had to keep their vineyard and all its produce for themselves. We can see such greed-fuelled violence in our society, physical violence to property or people, and emotional violence which people do to themselves by pursuing personal goals to the exclusion of all else. We can see such violence - usually of thought or feeling - in the church too, when people act like the Sadducees and determine that they are right and are going to be proved right no matter what happens.

But Jesus says that we should give to God what is God's. We should give him the selves that bear the imprint of his face. We should give him the lives which Jesus redeemed by his death at the hands of the unfaithful tenants, on the cross. We should give him the sin and wrongdoing, the bad habits of thought and deed, that Jesus died to take from us; for he paid for them and they are no longer ours to hang on to. And we should give him the joyful thanks and praise which he deserves.

Christians are called to be people who give and who give up, and who in their giving find that they are given more and more, as the owner of the vineyard gives his good tenants all that they need and deserve and far, far more.

Amen