

Reflection for the Twenty Ninth Sunday of the Church's Year

“Let me see the money you pay the tax with.....Whose head is this? Whose name?” This incident with the coin, this question about taxation, gives a very deep insight into Jesus’ understanding about his relationship with secular power and the governing of society. Jesus is locked in a fractious and heated argument with *the chief priests and the leaders of the Jewish people* concerning their lukewarm-ness, indifference and hypocrisy and he has plenty to say about how they had debased their Jewish faith and failed to live up to the expectations of their covenant relationship with God. He is in no way afraid, whatever the consequences, to oppose them. On the other hand, there is not a single sermon or statement about the Roman occupation of his homeland or the morality of the Roman empire. There are no denunciations of Roman brutality or butchery. Today’s debate about paying taxes is one of the very few occasions when Jesus comments on Roman political power. And in making the comment *“Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.”* he seems simply to accept the Roman occupation and the political structures of the day. And we need to ask the question *“Why does he criticise the chief priests and Jewish leaders for the failures in their religious leadership and not the Romans for their brutal empire?”*

Jesus does not promote a way of running civil affairs, organising government, running society. He does, however, tell us how to engage with the world however it is structured. We are to live in the way of the Beatitudes *“blessed the poor in spirit, the gentle., those who hunger and thirst for what is right, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers”* and we are to live in the way Jesus will soon describe in the parable of the Last Judgement... *“to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, visit the sick and those in prison”* Jesus’ life and ministry wasn’t about toppling governments or even challenging political structures; it wasn’t about challenging Roman occupation but about challenging the quality of our human interactions, our care for one another; it was about our love for God and neighbour. And he criticises the Jewish religious leadership for failing to demonstrate this by their lives and often misleading others by their example.

The expression *“Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.”* is probably one of the best-known sayings of Jesus. Followers of Jesus are not taken out of the world and must play their part in the world. But there is a balance to be struck. If our lives are simply about the pursuit of worldly power, financial gains, material comfort, position or status then we will grow distance to God. We must also *“give back to God what belongs to God.”* And whatever the political configuration of the day – even in a time of brutal foreign occupation – this can be done, and Jesus has shown us how.