

Link to a simple act of worship - <https://youtu.be/hPWmVTZL00Q>

Our Gospel reading today contains the question to Jesus about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. At one level it was a trick question designed to trip Jesus up in front of the crowds which Jesus seemed to adroitly sidestep. But in fact it is a question that goes to the heart of Christian citizenship and one that Jesus in fact meets head on. It is one of a number of passages in the New Testament that touch on this whole issue of the authority of rulers. Paul, in his letter to the Romans gives clear direction on the position of the citizen before the lawful authorities.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. *Rom 13:1*

.....
For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. *Rom 13:6,7*

The writer of the First Letter to Timothy directs that prayer be offered for those in authority

2 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. *1 Timothy 2:1,2*

We live in the world and we, as Christian citizens, are to contribute to the wellbeing of the society in which we live. Part of that is working through the implications of all this and balancing our different loyalties, to society, to family, to God.

Government is having a much bigger impact on our lives in the current crisis that we are experiencing with Covid 19. They are providing a much more restrictive framework for us as we seek to work our way through things; in setting a framework for living safely, in making provision for health, for education, in supporting businesses. There is the requirement to wear masks in shops and on public transport, to socially distance, to limit contacts. Those involved in the hospitality sector, who were beginning to get back to some sort of normal, have now been hit again. In the life of the Church, we are currently in our second period of having to worship outside our Church buildings. There are groups who feel that the State has overreached itself in the limitations it has placed up on us; but overall there is the recognition that our political system has served us well over these last few months.

But of course, as we look at our news bulletins we see examples of situations where governments have overreached themselves in the way they have dealt with dissent, where societies are marked by racial and social injustice.

So how do we strike the balance, how do we work through our loyalties? To return to our Gospel reading, the question posed to Jesus about the payment of taxes and Jesus' response do in fact take us to the heart of the issue. I came across the following, written by Julie McKinley of the National Bible Society of Ireland, on the online blog *Revolectionary*, written by young Irish adults exploring the lessons set for each Sunday.

In the ancient world, a king engraved on his coins showed he owned that land. Julius Caesar was the first Roman ruler to have his own image

stamped on the coins used wherever Roman dominion was enforced. These possibly newly minted coins flashed during the encounter we read above, shows Caesar as ruler of Judea, and therefore ruler of the people of Israel, which is why it is so controversial. According to some, paying tax to Caesar using these coins not only sustained the Roman economy but also was a way of venerating his image.

If we are speaking about images being imprinted, where are we? To go back to the very start of the story, to the second of the creation narratives we find in Genesis, God took the dust of the earth and moulded it in his image, and filled that dust with his breath. Dust and Breath fused to bring forth life. Life that is made in God's image. This God-breathed dust is stamped with his image, in the same way coins are stamped in the image of the Emperor.

“So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.” Jesus teaches - give to Caesar what is his - coins made of metal bearing his own likeness. But give to God what is his - you. The handiwork of God stamped in his image and filled with His breath. We bear the image of the Creator - it is to his kingdom we belong and not Caesar, no matter the might of the Roman army. We are God's image, stamped in dust and each unique.

The writer, Lois Tverberg, says,

‘Humans are God's coins, meant to be spent on His world, proclaiming God's Kingdom wherever we circulate’. (See, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, Lois Tverberg, Zondervan 2012).

As citizens we play our part in all aspects of the life and well being of our society. As Christians we offer ourselves,

our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.
Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work to your praise and glory.

In the words of the Methodist Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.