

It was decided some time ago that we'd kick off our annual Stewardship Campaign on today, October the 18th. We didn't know then what the readings would be for today. So I didn't choose that gospel that we've just heard. The readings were already set, but what a perfect reading to start a Stewardship Campaign. To use a soccer analogy that we have in England, it presented me with an open goal. So I look forward to talking about this gospel reading.

Let me draw your attention first to what's going on in the passage and, more specifically, who it is that's trying to entrap Jesus. It was the Pharisees and the Herodians together. They normally were opposed to each other. They were enemies, but on the understanding that my enemy's enemy is my friend, they've come together here to ask Jesus a trick question. They made sure to ask the question that they'd concocted in public because they thought that Jesus was bound to incriminate himself, and they wanted people to hear.

This was the question that in their cleverness they came up with. It was this. They asked Jesus, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" How smug they felt when they asked this question. They thought that they'd trapped Jesus. It was a gotcha question, as we like to say these days.

When I was at school, my favorite subject was history. We had a wonderful teacher, Mrs. Mercer. She had a slight speech impediment. One day in her class, I'll never forget, my friend Reuben Hunt put his hand up towards the end of her lesson and said, "Mrs. Mercer, who did Queen Victoria's eldest daughter marry?" Well, nobody was quite sure why Reuben asked this question. He wasn't the most intellectually curious boy in the class. But we soon found out because Mrs. Mercer said to him, "Ah, Reuben, she married the Prince of Prussia." We realized that Reuben had spent the whole lesson trying to find a question to which the answer was the Prince of Prussia. The Pharisees and the Herodians, like my friend Reuben, we're feeling smug when they asked their question.

The Herodians supported Herod, the puppet king under Rome who ruled in Jesus's time. They had a vested interest in the status quo. They knew that if Jesus were to deny the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar, then that would be a political offense. It would be sedition. The Pharisees, on the other hand, they were no friends of Herod. They resented the fact that a foreign army had invaded their land and demanded that they pay tax.

But their resentment went further than that. The Jews had a moral and a religious objection to the imagery on the Roman coinage. They didn't put images of people on coins

or on anything for that matter. But the Emperor Caesar had no such qualms. He made sure his image was on the coins, and then he put an inscription around the edge that caused even more offense, "Caesar, son of God, high priest."

So the Pharisees objected to the tax on religious grounds. They saw it as an insult to God. The Pharisees and the Herodians came together to challenge Jesus because they thought that in answering their question, Jesus was bound to upset someone. Either he'd fall foul of the government for political reasons by saying that they shouldn't pay tax, or he'd upset religious sensibilities of the majority of the people by saying that they should pay tax to a foreign heretic. They thought that they left Jesus no wriggle room. They were sure he'd incriminate himself. It seemed such a clever trap, but Jesus saw it coming and didn't fall into it. Jesus doesn't answer the questions straight away. He asked them to do something, "Show me a coin," he says. And then he asked a question, "And whose head is on the coin, and whose title?" They replied, "The Emperor."

It's been true throughout the ages that money has borne an image. In England, we have the Queen's head on all the currency. Over here, it's various presidents who appear on the notes and the coins. You also have an interesting inscription over here, "In God we trust." Someone can explain to me afterwards how this came to be and what it signifies, but it does invite an interesting question. Does our use of money declare that we really do trust God?

There's a well-known story of a young boy who got his hand stuck in a very expensive antique vase. His parents couldn't get his hand out, and they were resigned to losing this family heirloom as they broke it to get their son's hand out. So they said, "Well, let's just have one more try. Put all your fingers straight, and see if you can pull your hand out of the jar." "But then I'll drop my penny," said the boy. The boy was clinging onto his money, which is the opposite of what we're thinking about today, giving not clinging.

I think if we're to trust God with our finances, that we need to give in a planned and thoughtful manner. Let me say what I mean by this. Giving in a planned way means that we're intentional about our giving. We sit down with our budget, and we plan to give something away, which means that we don't just tip God. We don't simply offer him something of what's left over. The Bible talks about giving the first fruits of our harvest to God.

I must say at this point, how grateful I am to the over 200 households who are part of our stewardship scheme. To sign up to the scheme is to plan your giving to the church

over the course of a year. It's the money that we've received through this scheme this year that's enabled us to navigate the choppy financial waters that we've all come through or are coming through. Imagine if we didn't have the scheme, and we simply encourage people to be generous in the collection plate when they came to church. Well, we'd be ruined because we haven't had a collection for six months. It's the planned giving, or the giving that's planned through the stewardship scheme that's enabled us to flourish even in the midst of this pandemic.

So giving should be planned, and also I think it should be proportionate because we're all in very different financial situations. Some of us are yuppies, young, upwardly mobile professionals. Some are dinkies, dual income, no kids. Some are orchids, one recent child, heavily in debt. We have woopies, well-off older persons. We also have hobgoblins. "Help, our budget's gone beyond the limits of our income." We're all somewhere on that scheme, and our giving should be proportionate because we all have different amounts of money we can give.

To give proportionately means to give a percentage of our income. The Church of England recommends 5% of our income, but I'm delighted that the Episcopal church here in America seems to go with a more biblical principle of 10%. That's what tithing is in the Bible. It's the giving of 10%. We might start with a lower percentage and have 10% as an aspiration, but the principle is that we give a proportion of our income to God.

Getting back to the passage, let us look at what Jesus said after he'd asked the Pharisees and the Herodians to say whose image was on the coin. He said this after hearing it was the Emperor's, "Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's and to God the things that are God's." How typical of Jesus to respond to a challenge by posing an even greater challenge. He goes deeper and asks his hearers to consider the question of what belongs to God.

We know what belongs to the Emperor because his image is on it, but how do we know what belongs to God? Actually, the answer's pretty similar. The clue is in the book of Genesis, where we're told that all human beings are created by God and made in his image, his likeness. As God's creatures, we bear his image. God's likeness is stamped into us and onto us. God's signature is across our very beings. We owe God everything. Everything belongs to God. We owe our very life to him. That's what it means to bear his image.

Caesar's realm can't be separated from God's realm because everything belongs to God. We remind ourselves

of this in our communion service, where we say the words of King David, "For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." The issue isn't who owns the coins, but who owns the person. We give ourselves to whom we belong.

In just a few weeks, it's hard to believe, but we will be singing the Christmas carols again. One of my favorites is Christian Rossetti's In the Bleak Midwinter. Do you remember how that great carol ends? "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what I can I give him, give my heart."

I want to put our Stewardship Campaign this year in the broadest possible context. As people made in the image of God, we recognize that everything comes as gift. We belong to God. May we be given the grace to offer everything, our hearts and our lives back to him. Amen.