

Image & Inscription: Matthew 22:15-22

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or is it not?"

The trap is admirably well laid.

The Pharisees attempt another ploy.

They present Jesus with an "either/or" decision.

They want to force him into a no-win situation.

"Yes" would antagonise people under Roman oppression,

And a "No" would be anger the Romans themselves!

Jesus rejects the simple either/or.

"Show me the coin of the realm," he says.

Jesus calls attention to this image and inscription before he answers:

The coins you carry belong to Caesar.

They bear his image and inscription.

Certainly he can claim a tax from you.

But Jesus doesn't stop there adding you also stand under the claim of a just and loving God, who is Lord of all; render to him the things that are his.

In other words, give to Caesar what belongs to him,

but give him no more than what belongs to him.

Ultimately, of course, everything belongs to God something Jesus' adversaries in their malice and hypocrisy seem to have forgotten!

The denari bears an image; so do we.

The denari is from the mint of the emperor; we are from the mint of God.

As the use of the danari is determined by its likeness so, too, our purpose is determined by the one in whose likeness we are made.

We bear God's image and inscription just as the coin of the realm bears Caesar's image and inscription.

We bear God's image, by virtue of our creation in His likeness

As children of God we also bear His imprint.

The cross of Christ traced on our brows in baptism is a permanent and indelible inscription upon us.

Viewed from this perspective,

the relationship between government and God becomes a little clearer.

We're able to see government as something God can use to accomplish his good purposes on earth.

The work of maintaining order, pursuing peace, preventing oppression, restraining evildoers and protecting the innocent.

If the government is God's legitimate agent for temporal affairs, then it is appropriate God's people *i.e* the Church engage themselves in challenging and shaping political responses to poverty, inequality and injustice.

The stewardship of money alone, albeit essential as Graeme highlighted last week, is not all we are called to give as a Church.

When we render to God the "things" that are God's.

When we claim our baptismal identity.

We see our lives, time, talents and possessions as instruments for the accomplishment of his just and loving will.

As well as needing to give more money to St Peters, Graeme reminded us of our responsibility in the stewardship of both witnessing to and sharing the Good News with the poor.

My conscience was pricked, quite rightly on matters of fiscal giving to the point that I'll be taking action on that one, as I hope others will.

On matters of bringing God's love, hope and justice to the poorest and most marginalised people however my conscience is clear.

I have for 11 years now been working for a Benefice of Churches in Ward End, East Birmingham.

The context of socio-economic factors and statistics for Ward End means it falls in the top 5% of deprived areas identified nationally by its scorings on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is one of 14 priority neighbourhoods identified by Be:Birmingham and also evidenced as the most disengaged.

In terms of demographic, the area was formerly largely white working class. It is now a much more transient community - with a wider range of racial groups, most prominent and notably, a high Pakistani community, and more recently includes new migrant families from Poland and Romania.

This is not a world away from Harborne, in fact according to the AA route planner – it's 8.3 miles and only half an hour's drive.

And yet in so many other ways relative to Harborne it may as well be a million miles away. Poverty is not just about income.

It is a complex experience that impacts every aspect of people's lives and yes, it exists not only in the whole parish but amongst us too!

The different aspects of poverty fall into three categories:

Poverty of resources – when people lack sufficient resources, such as income, skills, qualifications or health, to achieve a good standard of living. And where resources are limited, so are people's choices and opportunities.

Poverty of relationships – when people lack the strong and supportive relationships on which individual, family and community life are built, resulting in loneliness and isolation.

Poverty of identity – when people lack a strong sense of self-worth and a belief in their own ability to respond to challenges. Where these are missing, it can lead to low self-esteem, a lack of well-being and aspiration, poor mental health and even drug and alcohol misuse.

We, at St Peters, as Church of Christian fellowship know first-hand the possibility of transformative change and are uniquely placed to bring lasting change to the poorest in our community.

We as Christians are resource rich in terms of our vision and values, not to mention our venues and volunteers.

Coinage we have too, although we need more but we have yet another currency to circulate, one that's priceless and has the power to cheer, inspire, console and convert.

It is what the poor today are waiting for, it's love

The blessing of Church, both people and place, are a gift to tackling poverty and transforming lives to build communities where people flourish and thrive.

As faithful disciples answering the greatest commandment of;

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength

We remember now the AND of the second greatest;

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

We are familiar with Paul's theology of the Church as the body of Christ and as such our neighbourhoods are full of neighbours, those known and some yet still strangers that are part of that interconnected, interdependent, richly gifted body.

In our passionate response and mission to what we as Christians understand to be at the very heart of God as Trinity, that is;

- ✓ A call to relationship
- ✓ A call to interdependence
- ✓ A call to community

We cannot ignore the poor!

Or even worse shirk our responsibility because we perceive others to be meeting their need!

It's just not acceptable to say, well St Johns does it.

Pope Francis isn't saying to his Cardinals and Bishops, we'll not concern ourselves with those who are gay or divorced who feel excluded from the body of the Catholic Church and Gods love because the Anglicans are already on the case with that one!

The poor and marginalised are lost pieces of silver and gold, missing from the Father's treasury, who also bear His image; they are part of our body.

We, as Christ did with the Pharisees are called to challenge the norms and also ourselves.

To turn the tables of thoughts and behaviours taken for granted upside down, to challenge the worship of false idols like the power of money or the belief that things, including people only have a value if priced!

Through the grace of God, all places and all people of His creation are made in his image and thus full of beauty, wonder, gifts, promise and possibilities.

On our brow rests the stamp of Him whose coinage and currency we are.

And whilst we're reviewing our financial stewardship let us ask ourselves both as individuals and as a church whether what we are offering in love and service would bring a smile to the face of God and joy to the heart of God.

Are we being everything that God wants us to be?

Doing everything that God wants us to do?

Living a life of such passion, such power and such purpose that to quote Mother Theresa, we are

“Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening; this is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world. Seeing and adoring the presence of Jesus, especially in the lowly appearance of bread, and in the distressing disguise of the poor.”

Amen.

Sarah Cooper, Lay Reader

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