

Matthew 22: 15-22

Render to Caesar

No avoiding it

Benjamin Franklin is usually credited with the quote “but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except **death and taxes**”, though Daniel Defoe (of Robinson Crusoe fame) or a man called Christopher Bullock probably penned the phrase decades before. But the phrase stuck and it certainly rings true. We don’t like to speak too much about it but in spite of the fact that on average we human beings are living longer, the day will come when, to quote the Bard, we will “shuffle off this mortal coil”. Of course our faith tells us that is far from being the last word on the matter. And as for taxes – well, for all that we moan about them and for all the effort that some go to trying to avoid them, taxation is with us to stay. The forms it takes, the rate at which it is applied and who falls under its scope changes depending on the preferences of those in power (and the economic and political pressures they are under) but yes, taxes are a fact of life. Perhaps what should be debating more should be how they might best be used for the well being of all. As we all know, on top of the deaths, illness and untold disruption to the way we live our lives, Covid has impacted greatly on the economy – on individuals’ livelihoods, on business and upon public services. That all adds up to a great deal of human misery and worry and huge damage has been done – economically and emotionally – on top of the effects on people’s physical and mental health. It isn’t for government to sort out (though there are some levers they can pull to assist). Really, it is for all of us to rally round and be understanding and supportive of one another at a community, perhaps even

a street level. We aren't out clapping NHS workers on a Thursday night anymore – and we'd need to be well wrapped up now if we were, but I wonder how we might engage more in a neighbourly way without imposing? But to return to taxes – politicians can put off talk about them for a while – and we can chew the fat over how effective or otherwise the money spent on furlough and support schemes have been or how much more is still needed; there can be reviews into procurement of PPE and the cost of all manner of other measures over the past 6 months - but you don't need to be a genius to work out that it's all going to have to be paid for – and inevitably, at some point we are all going to have to pick up the tab – one way or another, the government is going to ask us to stump up. There'll likely be increases in the taxes we know – and who's to say that there won't be new forms of taxation invented. Income tax came in on a temporary basis as a means of paying for the Napoleonic Wars – I suspect that there will be some plug made about paying for the battle against the coronavirus – and while many will bemoan the imposition, perhaps even be critical of Westminster or Holyrood or both, who would want our survival to dependent upon our individual ability to pay? My Dad only ever showed me his payslip once. He'd done well for himself – telegram boy to District Head Postmaster – and he'd been the branch secretary of the UPW along the way so he was very much a people person – he pointed out what he was paying in income tax – a good bit more than my total pay! And I remember his comment – If I wasn't earning this, I wouldn't be paying tax on it. Don't moan about paying tax, it's just a way of sharing things out a bit more evenly. We can do our bit to influence those in power to exercise their authority in a reasonable way – in a way that is for the greater good, rather than for selfish ends – but let's face facts – taxation is part of life, and it probably should be.

Jesus put on the spot

The crowds flocking to hear Jesus were growing in number but so was the strength of opposition raged against him. The scribes and the Pharisees came with another attempt to catch him out. The question was “Does the Law of God allow us to pay taxes to Rome?” There was an ongoing debate about this – some of it centred on religious grounds, but some concerned folks’ reluctance to collaborate with Romans. But Jesus was on his guard and, rightly, saw this as a trap. If he answered “No” he might well be reported to the authorities for advocating rebellion – and in the current climate of tension and fear of uprising there would have been a very real danger of him losing his liberty perhaps even his life. On the other hand, if he answered “Yes” he might well have been written off as a collaborator who’d caved in to the establishment and have been rejected by the general population who were looking for some means of expressing their opposition both to the Roman authorities and their local cronies. Was it just a clever answer or was there more to it? Jesus asked someone to show him a coin and asked whose image is this? Whose inscription was on it? Caesar’s was the reply. So give back to Caesar what is due to Caesar, and give to God what is God’s. It was a clever answer no doubt about it, it got Jesus out of a hole, but it was far more than that. It acknowledged that the civil authorities, even dubious ones like the often oppressive Roman Empire, have some duty, obligation due to them (and with it some obligation on them to play their part establishing the basics of peace and well being) BUT so too are there obligations on us to honour GOD. And it is interesting that the second part of Jesus’ answer is often downplayed or ignored.

Render to Caesar

What does “Render to Caesar” mean these days? Does it mean that we must obey everything that comes out of Westminster or Holyrood without any say in the matter? No taxation without representation was the clarion call of the colonists in America that was the precursor to the American Revolution. The sweeping restrictions imposed by both the UK and Scottish Parliaments this year have been unprecedented but, for the most part, accepted by the vast majority of the population as necessary to combat the coronavirus. But there is increasing pressure on parliament to have more say and for government to be held more accountable for the way they are using the powers. While I support the efforts to contain the virus, I personally have grave doubts about the level of summary fixed penalty fines being levelled in England with no cognisance being made of a person’s ability to pay - £1,000 even £10,000. They may be legal, but they are not RIGHT. I don’t believe they will go any way to foster good relations between government and people.

Duty and obligation are not facets of life which are highly prized these days, but in fact they are key to society functioning well. Part of the difficulty is that people often see duty and obligation as a burden on their shoulders only, whilst those with power -be it political or economic rarely show any sense of duty, responsibility or accountability on their part. Jesus speaks about duty towards the state – but it wasn’t an unqualified support. For there was a higher duty too. We’ve to do our bit, keep to the law of the land, pay our taxes, be responsible citizens (and part of that will holding our governments and elected representatives to account using the legitimate processes that are in place) BUT neither Westminster nor Holyrood have the final say on everything. They can pass Acts and Statutory Instruments, they can determine the taxes which we are due to pay; as we’ve seen – at least in an emergency situation – they can control all manner of our lives, our

comings and goings – and if we fall foul of that there may well be penalties to pay. But Jesus still says And render to God what is God's. We are due worship, honour and obedience to God. We are called to love, serve and follow his Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour and we're given the Holy Spirit to help us to do that – life as it was designed to be, life in all its fullness, life in eternal fellowship of love with God and his people are ours freely, in Jesus – but having accepted Jesus' love and forgiveness we are expected to live in step with him – to render to God the love and service that he deserves.

I have do idea what the politicians and their economic advisers will come up with as to how Covid 19 is going to be paid for but I think we can reasonably expect that it is going to cost us all a pretty penny. We might argue about the hows and wherefores but deep down I for one am glad that we don't yet live in a society where every aspect of life is determined by money. Don't get me wrong – money still plays a huge part in our society and we've got a long way to go to make our land a just and fair society for everyone – working towards that is part of what it means to be follower of Jesus Christ in the 21st century. People tend to focus on the first part of Jesus' phrase – Give to Caesar what is Caesar's – almost as though that makes us unquestioning slaves to government – we have obligations to the state no doubt about that – but let's remember the second part too – and give to God what is God's – and maybe remind civil authorities that we believe that they as well as we are answerable to a higher authority.

May the Lord bless you. Amen.