

**PENTECOST 20A 18-10-2020** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 33.12-23; Ps 99; 1 Thessalonians 1.1-10; Matthew 22.15-33

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.' Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.*

Has anyone ever asked you a really stupid question? Any question to which you want the answer is not a dumb question: if you don't know and you ask, that's a clever thing to do.

I mean the sort of dumb question like: What was the best thing *before* sliced bread? Or: If corn oil is made from corn, and vegetable oil is made from vegetables, what is baby oil made from?

Children ask a lot of excellent questions, but also some daft ones, like 'What are you doing?' when it is obvious that you're cooking tea or reading a book. My favourite answer to that kind of question used to be 'I'm riding a bicycle down the Hay Street Mall, why?'

In the reading from Matthew's gospel today we hear Jesus being asked a couple of incredibly dumb questions, as the people who didn't like him tried to trap him into saying something controversial.

The first question was about paying taxes to the Roman Emperor; this was controversial because although everyone grumbles about paying tax, there were people at this time who thought that withholding this tax was their duty as patriotic Jews.

The people living in Israel during the time of Jesus were living under Roman occupation. For Jewish people, this caused all sorts of problems because the Romans had a different religion, and they worshipped their Emperor. Jewish people worshipped one God, the God of Abraham and David and all their ancestors, and they lived according to the commandments.

When Jesus was asked this tricky question he knew that his questioners were trying to trap him. Whether or not to pay tax to the emperor was a big question for several reasons that are not the same as those WE might have for not enjoying paying tax!

First, why would anyone want to give their hard-earned cash to the empire that had invaded their land and taken over everything? Why would you want to support its harsh, strict rules and horrible punishment of anyone who broke them?

Second: this tax was levied annually on harvests and personal property and was a heavy burden on poverty-stricken people- so much so that it had caused a rebellion about twenty-five years before, for which the people were severely punished.

Paying this tax was not popular at all, but refusal would mean revolt, which could mean many people would die. Jesus was put between a rock and a hard place by those who wanted to entrap him. If he said that in his opinion, people should pay the tax, he could be accused of being a collaborator, on the side of those horrible Romans. If he said they shouldn't pay the tax because it was not of God, then he could be accused of being a rebel and a trouble-maker.

Jesus gave his famous answer: Give to Caesar- the Emperor- what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God. Which is ironic, because after all- everything belongs to God!

Then along came the next question from the Sadducees, who belonged to a Jewish sect that did not believe in any sort of life after death. Their ridiculous question was about a hypothetical woman who married seven brothers, one after another. They were either extremely unhealthy or unlucky, because they all died, or the poor woman found some way of poisoning them and not getting caught. And the silly question? Who would be her husband in the resurrection?

Jesus treated their question with characteristic intelligence and told them they were dead wrong. He said that in heaven people are like the angels, and don't marry.

Then he used scripture against them, reminding them that in the book of Exodus, it is written that when Moses first encountered God at the burning bush, God said to him,

"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"- who had all died long before. Therefore, as God is God of the living, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must still be alive, with God.

The kind of Semitic argument Jesus used is not the way we would argue, but those Sadducees would have understood him. And they were astounded.

I'd like us to think about the first of these two 'dumb' questions: the one about what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God.

If we assume that the emperor represents whoever it is we pay taxes to today, then Jesus was saying that while we might owe tax money to the government, we owe our whole selves to God.

How does that work? And more importantly, what does it MEAN?

It says something about our money, possessions, time, work, and everything else; and about not dividing it up into sections or compartments. For example: 'This amount of my time belongs to work, this amount belongs to holidays, and this part belongs to God. This amount of my money belongs to the tax department; this amount to the bills; this amount is for me; and this part is God's.' And so on.

I think Jesus was saying- actually, that's not quite right. It ALL belongs to God, because who do you think gave it to you in the first place?

This has implications for us, and should cause us to think and pray before we make decisions about what kind of work we do, how we spend our leisure, what we spend money on, and what is important to us.

As followers of Jesus we need to understand that he wants our whole lives to be infused and filled and embraced by God's love- not only an hour or so on a Sunday morning.

Jesus wants us to sit lightly with our possessions, to be grateful for things but not controlled by our need or desire for them.

Jesus wants us to be generous, as God is generous: offering all our treasure, time, and talents to God.

Last weekend we had our fashion show and jewellery stall here, and many people worked extremely hard on the day and beforehand. We raised a lot of money, which will help us to improve the facilities of this worship centre.

But the greatest joy of those events was not about fundraising. It was about people working together, thoughtfully donating lovely things, being generous, meeting new friends, and having fun. Praise God.

So, giving to the emperor what is the emperor's, and giving God what is God's, means putting God first in all we do, with every cent we have and with every ounce of our energy.

Here's an exercise you might like to do. Take your credit or debit card out of your wallet or purse, get a texta or a marker pen, and put a cross on it.

Every time you go to spend money, think about it, and ask God whether this is how you should be spending what, after all, God has given you.

Putting Jesus in his rightful place, at the centre of our lives, will bring us more blessings and joy than we can imagine. Now THAT has got to be the best thing since sliced bread.

The Lord be with you.