

# **Reflection on Sunday 22 October 2023**

**By Maria Henriksson-Bell, Lay Leader of Worship**

I confess I felt rather dizzy when I realised what the Gospel reading for today was because in a few lines it touches on so many things. I could talk for a lot longer than I am going to.

If, like me, you are at all fascinated by politics, economics, social justice, hierarchy, establishment versus the people etc, I do recommend that you go home and re-read this passage from Matthew chapter 22 (verses 15-22) and do some research around it.

I recommend this approach to the Bible in general. Read it like you've never read it before. Look up the bits you think you know. Try a different translation. All the stories about Jesus have these layers of meaning, of history, poetry and prophecy. They are stories for our times, too.

Let's go back to today's story.

The Saducees and the Pharisees, two Jewish sects living under Roman occupation, did not see eye to eye on quite a few things. The Herodians were Saducees and disagreed with the Pharisees on the role of the Temple, how to relate to the Romans, the value of oral tradition versus scripture, among other things. The Pharisees, in particular, valued keeping separate from the unclean business of the Roman Empire.

But one thing they had in common was that representatives of both groups really wanted Jesus out of the picture.

They feared the way he challenged them and they were scared that Jesus and his followers would provoke the Romans into a

backlash against non-citizens. They were, very understandably, worried that Jesus and his followers would upset the already uneasy peace they had with the Romans.

But at this stage Jesus is becoming popular, at least among those who are not part of the establishment, so the Herodians and the Pharisees can't be too heavy handed, they need to make him unpopular before he can be killed.

They try to trick him into giving a definite answer on whether to pay tax to the Romans. The Romans employed locals to collect tax on their behalf and corruption was rife. Tax collectors were not allowed in polite society and you would only take the job if you were already a low-life.

Fun fact: Matthew, the author of today's Gospel, had been a tax collector.

If Jesus had said "No, don't pay tax to the Romans!" he would have endangered his followers by angering the Romans. If he had said a clear "Yes!" he could have been accused of collaborating with, or even endorsing, the Roman occupiers.

Note, Jesus does not say yes or no.

When they show him a coin and ask if the Law, which Jesus says he has come to fulfil, allows them to pay tax to the Romans, I find myself wanting Jesus to say "No".

The coin Jesus looks at, the coin they so easily found in their pockets, has a picture of the pagan emperor Tiberius with the inscription "Emperor Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus, high priest". It refers to a mere mortal, the Emperor Augustus as a

God and his son as high priest. And I am disgusted. This is extreme idolatry.

We don't often hear of people who think they are God these days and if we do we think they are either unhinged artists with a huge ego or people who are unwell. We don't take them seriously, but the cults of the Roman emperors was serious business.

You could lose your head if you didn't bow down and worship Caesar, the Emperor. Plenty of Christians did indeed later lose their lives because they refused to worship the emperor as God.

Paying this coin could easily be seen as a tribute to the emperor and I find myself wanting Jesus to take clear sides and reject any business with this filthy lucre, but Jesus of course sees the bigger picture.

There is a kingdom that belongs to the emperor where we have all kinds of earthly duties and a kingdom of God where we have moral duties, and we live in both.

If the Herodians and the Pharisees had approached Jesus with a genuine moral conundrum, if they had earnestly said "We feel morally compromised at the thought of paying this tax, what do you advise we do?" I am sure Jesus would have offered some guidance on this morally ambiguous situation, but they aren't, they are trying to trip him up.

Jesus, however, doesn't fall for their trick.

When Jesus says "Render unto Caesar" (Give to Caesar what is his), he is not giving a thumbs up to oppression or idolatry, he

treats the coin as insignificant, the empire as insignificant! "Give to God what belongs to God," he says.

The coin bears the image of the emperor, so belongs in the messy world of money, tax and empire.

We who are made in God's image belong to God.

But what about our complicated coins? The systems we are part of, the society we live in etc?

In the name of economic growth, we turn a blind eye on overconsumption and overproduction at the expense of the planet and we trick ourselves into thinking we have no guilt when wars are fought over commodities we consume. Why do we turn a blind eye?

Because, like the society around Jesus, we are caught up in the mess, we benefit from it.

Fortunately, we have some good guidelines:

"Love God and love your neighbour."

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

"Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me."

"Love your enemies, do good to those who harm you."

We must never weaponise these words or aim them in judgement at other people, but we have we have a strong moral duty to keep these principles at the forefront of conversation when decisions are made in a world plagued by conflict and injustice.

I am sure I am not alone in both feeling profoundly grateful for not living in a war zone, or in the midst of disaster, thankful for clean water, shelter and electricity, while also feeling profoundly sad for the state of the world. It is daily work to guard ourselves against cynicism and hopelessness.

What helps is to listen out for hope, for signs of reconciliation and, on days when I can't see them, I choose to trust that God has got it in hand and trust the vision of Isaiah:

"They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore."

Amen