

TFTD 25.33, Friday 11 April 2025
Questions, questions: Luke 20.20-26



So they watched Jesus and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. So they asked him, 'Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness

and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.' He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

The pace is hotting up, and Jesus's enemies are doing all they can to trap him in his words so as to gather evidence against him. We can ignore the smarmy insincere flattery they begin with ("You show deference to no one, but teach the way of God according to truth"). Did they think this would put him off his guard?

So then comes the trick question: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

No one likes paying taxes, and especially not taxes levied by an imperial overlord. This was a poll tax levied by the Romans on every adult male (older readers may remember how unpopular Margaret Thatcher's poll tax was in 1990). To make matters worse, it had to be paid in silver coins featuring the emperor's head; for scrupulous Jews, this not only violated the prohibition against images, but it also featured blasphemous inscriptions making the emperor "son of God". So paying the tax was a hot issue.

Whatever Jesus said was going to get him into trouble. If, as the nationalists would have liked, he had said "don't pay it", he could have been denounced to the Roman authorities as a subversive. (In fact, this accusation was used anyway: "we found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor", Luke 23.2). If, on the other hand, he said "pay it", he could have been denounced as yet another collaborator, just like the hated tax collectors.

So Jesus gave his famous enigmatic answer: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Here again we see one of Jesus's favourite teaching methods: say something surprising, and then let people puzzle out its meaning. And indeed, ever since, people have been arguing about what this statement really means.

In one way it's a clever evasion, but it's much more than that. Without being a worked out political philosophy, it does propose a fundamental principle of Christian attitudes towards the State: we are subject both to God and to the State, the governing authorities. Even if our overriding duty must be to God, the State has a legitimate role which has to be acknowledged.

Early Christians were very clear that they should be good and responsible citizens. The State had a legitimate claim on people, and therefore they should, for example, pay their taxes.

The first Christians were equally clear, however, that the authorities sometimes exceeded their legitimate role, and that when there was a clash between duty to God and duty to the authorities,

duty to God had to come first (think of Peter's words in Acts 5.29: "we must obey God rather than any human authority").

The State should not, therefore, demand unquestioning obedience in all circumstances; it should allow space for freedom of conscience; it should not override freedom of religion. This is what human rights are all about: setting necessary limits on the power of the State.

But at the same time, religion should not attempt to take over the State; religious institutions and movements should not try to seize political power. The Church has a legitimate role of speaking out on political matters, but if it tries to take control, things always end badly for the Church (we might think of how the Roman Catholic Church, onceso powerful, has been discredited in the Republic of Ireland; we might fear that Christian nationalism in the USA will cause more and more people to steer clear of Christianity).

Arguments about the limits of State power and the limits of Christian intervention in politics will continue for ever. Jesus set out the basic principle that, under God, the State has legitimate claims upon us. He leaves it to us to argue about what precisely this means in our particular historical circumstances and under current political régimes.

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