

## Sermon by John Boylan – Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2017 – All Saints Church Wokingham

“Give therefore to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”.

Have you ever asked a question and got an answer that didn’t answer the question you thought you’d asked? Let me give you an example. Do you remember Peter Sellers’ wonderful Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther and the scene where he was standing outside a bank with a dog sitting next to him? A man approached him and said, “Does your dog bite?” Clouseau responded “No”. whereupon the man bent down to pat the dog and immediately got bitten on the hand. “Hey, you said your dog didn’t bite” he exclaimed. Clouseau looked at him and said, “It’s not my dog!”

And the Pharisees in today’s reading metaphorically got ‘bitten’ as well. The poor attempt to first flatter Jesus by speaking about his integrity and commitment to truth before hitting him with a political nightmare question didn’t deserve the answer they were looking for.

In 6 AD Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was appointed Imperial Legate (governor) of the province of Roman Syria. In the same year Judea was declared a Roman province, and Quirinius was tasked to carry out a census of the new territory for tax purposes. This new territory was one of the three portions into which the kingdom of Herod the Great had been divided on his death in 4 BCE; his son Herod Archelaus was given Judea but complaints of misrule prompted his removal and Judea and Samaria were placed under direct Roman rule, although Galilee and other areas remained autonomous. A quick note here because by this previous statement you’ll see that the dates for the census and the death of Herod in 4BC appear to contradict Luke’s nativity story. It’s a subject not for today but there are strong arguments to suggest that this was not the first census and that Quirinius had served a previous term in Syria – the reality is that some of Luke’s information may have been confused rather than wrong.

But the point we are interested in today is that there was a census, and this required men to register and declare their resources and estate. The tax was in effect a poll tax of the Jews and provoked the wrath of the country. In Acts 5. 37 we read that Judas of Galilee led a revolt which was suppressed only with some difficulty. Many scholars date the origin of the Zealot party and movement to this incident. By the time Jesus was fulfilling his ministry this tax was seen as a bitter reminder of Roman subjugation.

And if you recall Jesus at his trial before Pontius Pilate, was accused of promoting resistance to Caesar's tax. Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. 2 And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.” (Luke 23:1-4)

So, the Pharisees’ question was a trap. If Jesus had said yes to paying the tax then the people would have disowned him for supporting the occupying forces. If he said no then they would have him on a charge of stirring up revolution against Rome and be liable to arrest.

But Jesus’ reply is not what they are expecting. They should have been warned when Jesus asked to see a coin because Pharisees could never carry coins with the image of an Emperor bearing the inscription which proclaimed him divine. It was idolatry and of course having such a coin on Temple grounds was blasphemous. It’s a great turnover but then this is not a game and Jesus is not about to reveal to anyone his views on paying taxes or on how governments conduct their business. There is no message to this effect for us either however, Jesus does take the opportunity to highlight a far greater concern and one that is as applicable today as when he delivered the message.

Yes, Governments are necessary, taxation may be necessary, and we all have views on who and how the country should be run. So, render unto Caesar what is due but don't ever forget what is due to and belongs to God. And what exactly is that?

I was speaking to Steve Smith last week about my thoughts for this sermon particularly as he follows me with the intercessions, and he offered a thought that everything we are or have is God's. We are told in Genesis 1.27 that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" and we actually profess in the liturgy of this service that "Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you," so maybe Steve's got a point.

But although we say it how practical is it to put into action outside of this service and in our daily lives where contrary to our statement we seem to be owned by any number of people or things; families, employers, organisations, governments, debtors, creditors even possessions sometimes. There's scarcely enough time in the day to do all the things we have to do let alone all the things we should be doing or want to do. It's a bit difficult to get away from all this 'rendering unto Caesar business'. But there's good news and inevitably, let's say, not bad news but opportunities – that's the positive spin on bad news.

Ralph Waldo Emerson the American poet is accredited with some great quotes – he's the guy that coined the phrase 'many a good tune being played on an old fiddle' but the one I like is "The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet." It's good isn't it, and it makes you think; are we in danger of getting so caught up in our lives that we forget the basics and start building a compartmentalised God that we only get out when we get a free moment or on Sundays? Okay, so a bit extreme and the good news is 'probably not'; when I look at the letters in the Wokingham Paper about the Town Centre Regeneration, the public anger, and the Council's denial and self justification, when I look at the Brexit fiasco, and the millions it is costing, the political posturing and sniping, I see people 'rendering unto Caesar'. But when you think about the number of people who put their hands up during David's sermon last week about caring and the number of ways we offer support and help to others,, when you see the power of the hurricanes and yet the beauty of the leaves on the trees changing colour; when you see a new baby, you see God working in our lives. It may just be that we don't look on these activities as being 'spiritual or Godlike. And that's the good news. (pause)

I mentioned that there was some not so good news...er sorry, opportunity? Well, it's something we've discussed at depth in PMC, the question, this 'recognising what God is doing in our lives". And there's a knock-on question of why we don't talk about it to other people when we do see something. No matter how unlikely the co-incidence I bet that we are more likely to say, "how funny was that" than "God caused that to happen". And yet, if we do say "It was God" you get one of two reactions. Unless you are wearing a dog collar you may be classed as a religious nutter. On the other hand people may just respond with agreement and you might be surprised when your story triggers a story of their own. That's what we do when talk isn't it, pick up on things the other person is saying; it's like the ripples from dropping a stone in a pond and actually bringing God into some of our conversations is surprisingly cathartic and motivating too – ask anyone in a house group.

We are told that the Pharisees went away 'amazed'. Well, you can read this several ways but I suspect amazed is the wrong word. Annoyed maybe, frustrated are the immediate thoughts but maybe Jesus' words made them think. It's ironic because at least twice a day they would have said the words of the Shema; "*Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your might.*" (Deut. 6 4-5) and it would be nice to believe that they suddenly realised that they'd lost their way. Sadly, history doesn't really support that conclusion.

But in our case maybe we can try and think about what God is doing in our lives and if it helps borrow from a well-known statement: "God is for life and not just Christmas".

Amen