

Let's be clear. Jesus wasn't trying to give an answer, for all time, on the relationship between God and political authority. That wasn't the point. He was countering the Pharisees' challenge to him with a sharp challenge in return. Was it, after all, they who were compromised? Had they really given full allegiance to their God? Were they themselves playing games, keeping Caesar happy while speaking of God? NT Wright

Come what may, however and whenever we are buffeted and battered by the storms of life, Jesus and the early church offer us convictions which can withstand testing times. Faith brings the calming knowledge that we are secure and solid-grounded in the presence of God, whose purposes of love will always hold us firm. Without this conviction, we risk becoming like those autumn leaves stripped from the tree by the lashing of the gale. Jane Williams

1 Thess 1.6-7 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

A dream that I have is that when the Book of Life is written about the Parish of Gisborne, the epitaph may read, "They all became imitators of the Lord and became an example to all the believers in Macedon, Riddells Creek, Bullengarook and Gisborne." In that one sentence, the mission of God in Christ Jesus would be complete, and the need for a parish, other denominations, and the salvation of all people would be concerned with the welfare of all.

In writing to the seaport of Thessaloniki, Paul knew that a crossroads between Asian culture and the Hebrew-Greek world was a place that indeed needed encouraging. All cultures were catered for, and it mattered not if you were Hellenic, Jewish, Roman or Egyptian; you would find all that you need, and many things you probably don't need, available for you. The fledging Church community, not based in the synagogues but standing alone, were committed to showing their faith and living it by example.

Now, let's remove our rose-coloured glasses, as we know that Paul wrote to the godly in Thessaloniki at least twice. This one starts nicely enough, but soon, Paul will be at pains to inform them, "You're doing fine, but you may need to look out for the following." No doubt, what followed would be like a gale tearing through the region's trees, removing foliage and dry, dangerous timbers. By the end of this letter, damaged limbs will lie on the ground.

The tone, though, is very encouraging. It is a friendly letter that details that Paul, Timothy and Silas had nothing but good memories of the hospitality they received. The sting in the tale, though, is to remind them that those set aside in leadership are to be cherished and their teaching well received. In addition, in 1 Thess 4, Paul reminds them of personal integrity. They are called not to live for themselves, but rather, putting aside immorality and self-seeking, live for Christ in whose image they bear and present to the world.

Therein lies the twist. Not all in the community lived in the Lord as they should, preferring self-promotion rather than letting their loving actions speak to the broader community. At no point has Paul instructed them to leave behind the community living. To witness the Gospel, living this in the community context is essential. Paul gives thanks that they have left aside the Hellenic and Roman attendance to idols and false gods. This is good, but it is also important to show forth the love of God in Christ Jesus in all ways and actions.

It is, for Paul, one of those moments where he was at pains to point out that the Way of Christ is not to set up a structure along the lines of the synagogue ways of organised faith, but rather, a commitment to life that is loving, accepting, and rejoicing (there is that phrase again) in the Lord

always. To be authentic in one's faith is to embrace it in thought, word and deed. Whilst in the world, we submit to the world, but we do not compromise on the love and teaching of Jesus.

Helping to emphasise the need to be loving people who are living the Gospel, Paul also thanks for working there as a tent-maker and helps show in example the way of Christ. This is why the 'imitation' of Christ and Paul was seen as necessary. As the Gospels tell us, the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. He was not to be a burden on the people but rather, part of the people. I do hope that the incoming Synod and officers are listening as well. Made in the image or likeness of God, we are to give to God what we have received. This is our whole self, body, mind and spirit. Paul never advocated setting up a formal meeting place like the synagogues and did not wish to burden the people with taxes. The money collected is for the saints and those in need.

Rewinding the clock some 25 years, the point was made by Jesus in the Temple as the Pharisees set out to trip him up. There is a backstory or three behind the question. We remind ourselves that Jesus, having entered triumphantly, is in the Temple precincts. He had already overturned the market tables and had some very harsh things to say to the Pharisees. Intent on finding a way to set up a major conflict, the question regarding Temple taxes was a doubly loaded dilemma. Answer it one way: Jesus is at odds with the teaching of Moses. Answer it another way: he would be committing treason in the eyes of the Romans.

So, what is at stake here in the question to Jesus?

Let's look at the treason first, for that is obvious. Caesar Tiberius' image was on the coins. In the understanding of the Roman Empire in its early days, Caesar was considered godly. Caesar ruled the known world, and whatever was spoken was to be taken as law. One of the ways of supporting the Empire was to tax the people locally. In Jerusalem, where the Temple stood, was a massive fort, the Fort of Antonius. It housed the legions that controlled not only the city but also Pilate and the representatives of Rome. The tax was used for the upkeep of thousands of soldiers, who, by their very presence, were seen to subjugate and deny the superiority of the Jewish elders.

Their presence on the Holy Mountain was not welcome. The Romans allowed the Jewish authorities to mint their coins in the Temple to keep the peace. To offer cash with an image of a person who claimed to be a god would be idolatrous and out of step with the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments). You were not permitted to make any likeness of God, albeit the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or the Emperor, Caesar.

The temple coin contained an image of the Temple, and some of them, Herod. It was, in fact, worth more than the Roman coin. Half a shekel contained up to 7.5 ounces, over 200 grams of pure silver. Imagine a block of butter, the old one-pound block. That is a considerable amount of silver. Half a shekel, the Temple tax would equal around \$AU500. This was to be paid annually. I don't know about you, but carrying a block of silver the size of a block of butter around is not a practical idea. So, you could pay this in instalments by changing your Roman coins into Temple currency and do so in instalments. If you could give more, you were encouraged to do so.

In the story of the Widow's Mite, she gave two Greek coins of a value that was less than the denarii currency of the Temple. The money changes would not have even bothered with changing it. It had no deity on the coins, so she offered what she had. She gave her all. And as Jesus observed, she gave more than any other pretenders or hypocrites who were now trying to catch him.

So, here is the dilemma put to Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay taxes?" asked Jesus to rule the offering to the state of coins with the Emperor's image as akin to an offering to an idol. Get this one wrong, and

Jesus would be arrested for treason against the Roman occupiers, or blasphemy preached within the Temple.

For a moment, we think of the widow. Jesus observed, "She gave her all." The answer that followed for the Pharisees cut at the heart of God's teaching and the Torah's books.

"Whose image is on this coin?"

Behind that question is a fundamental point made in the first story of creation, as found in the first book of Moses, commonly called "Genesis." In verse 27, we read,

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God, he created them;
male and female, he made them.

What this provides is the key to the answer that follows.

Throughout the Psalms, the prophets, and the teaching of the Ten Commandments, God required that the people's offering be in the name of the one whose image they held: the Shema, Deuteronomy 6.4.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

What God wanted was not sacrifice or taxes. Idolatry was prohibited. The image of what God wanted was the image we all bear. Ourselves, made in the image of God as created. God requires us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice.

Romans 12:1 Therefore, because of God's mercy, I urge you, brothers and sisters, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Again, in an earlier letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 8:4 and 8 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one."...But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

The question about whose image is on the coin was not answered concerning the Temple coins, but rather, in relationship to the nature of ourselves before God. We exist in the world, but if we are to be one with God, it is ourselves that we must offer.

"Whose image is this?"

Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's. Render to God that which is God.

This negated the intent of the Pharisees. They knew the teaching. God delights not in any man's legs, nor does the sacrifice at the altar release them from the obligation of looking after the poor, the weak, the marginalised, the widows and the orphans. We are to render with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength our service to God. And three times a day, the Pharisees would say this. It held their turbans in place and dangled from their arms in leather straps. It was on the lintel of their houses. It was to be taught to their children and their children's children.

An intelligent question about taxes designed to trap Jesus into certain death entrapped the Pharisees into their spiritual death. No wonder they were amazed and left him.

So, the question is also about the world and the divine and our relationship with God. What does the Lord require? Let me rephrase the question. When you encounter yourself in the mirror, in a picture, or those with vision impairment, by touch, whose image do you bear?

And as you ponder that, we think back to the teaching of Moses, the prophets, John the Baptist, our Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul and ask the question of Micah, "What is it that the Lord requires?"