

Related topics

For further study:

Christology; prayer; discipleship; conversion; paschal mystery; images of God; spiritual poverty; option for the poor; reign of God; mystery of the church

Closing Prayer

O God, whose image we bear
and whose name we carry,
yours is the world and all it contains.

Recall us to our true allegiance,
so that above the powers and rulers of this world
you alone may claim our fullest loyalty and love.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

Opening prayers, Ordinary Time 29, Year A²

CPL • LBC Year A Proper 24.odt • 2020-07-20

² *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.*

Proper 24

(Sunday between 16 and 22 October inclusive)

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 45.1-7	Cyrus, the instrument of God
Psalms 96.1-9 [10-13]	Ascribe to the Lord the honour due to his name
1 Thessalonians 1	The life and expectation of the Church
Matthew 22.15-22	On paying tribute to Caesar

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

On paying tribute to Caesar

When the chief priests and Pharisees had heard the parables, they realised that Jesus was speaking about them. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' ²¹They 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.' ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Matthew 22.15-22 NRSV¹

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Comments and Questions

In 22.15-22 Matthew follows the story-line of Mark 12.13-17 but sharpens the the opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees. He says the plot to trap Jesus was initiated by the Pharisees (22.15), who send some of their disciples along with the Herodians to question Jesus. Matthew uses the verb *pagideuo* ('set a snare or a trap'), the only time it appears in the New Testament. Their ill will towards Jesus is heightened by Jesus knowing their 'malice' and addressing them as 'hypocrites'. When they get beaten in the debate they slink away (22.22b).

The story takes the form of a conversation in which the opponents of Jesus think they have manoeuvred him into an embarrassing position. In responding Jesus manages to move the conversation to a higher level and to give a reasonable and relatively inoffensive answer to the original question.

The tax being debated is the *kensos* or a 'poll tax' (Latin, *census*). Paying this tax was a prerequisite for living peacefully as a subject of the Roman empire, and exercising the rights associated with that status. Direct rule by Rome over the province of Judea was instituted in A.D. 6, and the tax was exacted from men, women, and slaves from the age of twelve to sixty-five. This tax was to be paid in Roman currency. The gospel accounts (Matthew 22.19f.) indicate that the amount of tax to pay amounted to a denarius, a full day's pay for a labourer (see Matthew 20.2). In Jesus' day the most widely circulated denarius bore the image of the emperor Tiberius and the Latin inscription *Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus Pontifex Maximus* ('Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest'). Tiberius reigned as Roman emperor between A.D. 14 and 37.

The existence of the 'poll tax' and the mode of payment were sources of political discontent among the Jews. The Pharisees managed to coexist with the Romans and their attitude to paying the tax was probably similar to that of Jesus. The Herodians must have supported the tax as they remained in power only with the support of the Romans. Nationalists opposed the tax and it sometimes caused rebellions.

In Matthew's account the Pharisees take the offensive against Jesus, They try to get him to make a public statement about the tax. If Jesus

opposes paying the tax he would get into trouble with the Roman authorities. If, on the other hand, he is supportive of paying the tax then he would lose credibility with the nationalists. Jesus actually recommends paying the tax on the grounds that it is the emperor's coinage that is being used. By using this answer Jesus avoids the wider question of co-operation or resistance to the Romans. At the same time, he turns the question into a spiritual matter with a challenge to be diligent about 'the things that are God's' (22.21).

What do you think Jesus' position is about paying the 'poll tax'? To what extent should we be obedient to the state? There is a wider issue of what are 'God's things'. Perhaps this section of Matthew is more to do with trying to bring a leader down than with issues of tax.

Quotations

1

One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

Martin Luther King Jr., 1929–1968

2

An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.

Martin Luther King Jr., 1929–1968

3

I heartily accept the motto, 'That government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe — 'That government is best which governs not at all'; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.

Henry David Thoreau, 1817–1862