

SFX 29A 2023
Render Unto Caesar

They approached Jesus with smiles but they came to trap him with a coin. There have been many a prince, many a politician brought down by a Poll Tax, and this is what it is. The *kensos - census* in Latin – ‘poll tax’ or ‘head tax’ –was levied by the Romans when they took control of Judea in 6AD. Men, women, slaves from the age of twelve to sixty-five must pay a denarius – a full day’s wage – to Caesar. *“Nothing is certain but death and taxes”* as the old saying goes.

The Pharisees and Herodians were astute politicians and arch enemies of each other. **The Pharisees** wanted an end to Roman rule in their homeland. They wanted to keep out the Foreigner to preserve their Jewish way of life. No to Rome! No to outside interference! **The Herodians**, on the other hand, were whole-hearted supporters of cooperation with Rome. They saw that it brought benefits despite a little loss of sovereignty.

Romaphiles, Romasceptics – but it doesn’t matter as they had a **common enemy**. So together they approach Jesus with a little flattery. All politicians know the black arts of spin-doctoring. Flatter the voter and pretend you care about his views: *“Master we know, you are honest and unafraid...”* That much is true of Jesus. Then they put their killer question. It is a clever question, sure to catch him out. *“Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Tell us your opinion, we would really like to know.”*

Jesus seems caught in a trap. If he says that taxes **should be paid to Caesar**, then the Pharisees will round on him as being **unpatriotic**, not a good Jew, and he would lose his standing with the people. If he says the tax should **not be paid at all** then the Roman authorities would **soon round on him as a troublemaker**, a revolutionary like those Zealots who were in perpetual rebellion against Rome. Romaphile or Romasceptic? **Traitor or troublemaker?** Together the Pharisees and Herodians thought they had successfully engineered his downfall.

But Jesus saw the trap being laid. He always seems able to see through our human tricks. So he first subtly exposes their hypocrisy. *“Show me a coin.”* Ah! You yourselves carry around the offensive coinage. You are in some sense already collaborating.

Jesus holds up the coin. What is so offensive about it? We are all aware of how a coin can be charged with meaning. A currency is about more than simple economics, it is about sovereignty, it is about who is in charge.

Jesus takes the denarius and holds it before them. *“Whose head is this? Whose name?”* *“Caesar’s”* they replied. Did Jesus read out those words on the coin: TIBERIUS DIVUS AUGUSTUS – the Divine Tiberius, the exalted. There was a blasphemous claim on the coin against the Lord God of Israel. It was not just political sovereignty that was at issue here. It was Divine sovereignty.

At a simple level Jesus evades the trap: *“Then render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.”* The physical coin, bearing the image and inscription of Caesar should be returned to Caesar. Give it to him back, then. It has Caesar’s mug on it.

But then Jesus raises the debate to a whole new level. *"And render unto God what is God's."* When he asks *"Whose head is this."* Or better: *Whose image is this? Whose Icon?* Jesus is using the Greek word *Icon* or *Image*.

We read in the Book of Genesis: *"Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26)* Isn't every human being made in this image and likeness? The coin belongs to Caesar, **but even Caesar belongs to God**. Just as in the first reading, doesn't Isaiah even call the Cyrus the Great, Emperor of Persia, that foreign military leader, God's anointed, God's messiah in the first reading? Cyrus will release the Jewish Prisoners in Babylon and send them home. *"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it"* says the Psalmist. Today's Gospel is about sovereignty: Divine sovereignty.

Some people have understood the phrase *"Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's"* as being about the **distinction of the two spheres** – politics and religion, that they should not interfere with one another, that that we just calculate a fair division of between Caesar and God. But that is not what it is saying. Jesus doesn't give an **either-or** answer, rather **both-and**. Even Caesar belongs to God. *It all belongs to God*, The Church raises its voice on behalf of every human being made in the image and likeness of God.

The Church has consistently defended interaction between the secular and the spiritual. When Pope Benedict made his visit to Britain, and addressed our politicians in Westminster Hall he talked about the mutual interdependence of faith and politics. *"I would suggest" he said "that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization."* We do not choose between God and Caesar, faith and reason.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says idolatry is worshiping *"a creature in place of God."* Pope Francis has warned that we have **created new idols**. *"The worship of the golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose."* *"The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person."* EG55

We might imagine a poor Galilean, struggling to find his Denarius to pay his tax to Caesar. And we might think today of those scraping a living, struggling on the margins of society. People plunged into poverty all over the world because of corrupt regimes, malfunctioning economic systems, manifest injustices. Those denied a fair wage. The world of power needs to hear the Gospel. Just as Caesar is made in the Divine Image, so are they. Every human being is GOD'S COIN, stamped with his image, worthy of respect, dignity and love.