

Matthew 22:15-22
Honour where it's due

recognise the responsibility of bearing God's image

What would you answer if I asked you your favourite Bible verse? I bet we would come up with all sorts of answers. It could be that if you're rather less familiar with the Bible, then something shorter and memorable, but still wonderful, might hit the spot:

God is love, ...

(1 John 4:16)

That's just a short snippet, only about 10% of the full verse, but that's fine. You might have memorised something a bit longer than a single verse:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

(Proverbs 3:5-6)

It might be that wonderful summary of the Gospel of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. I'm sure this one would be up there in the top ten favourite verses:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

(John 3:16)

Actually, I wonder whether asking someone for not just their single favourite verse, but their own individual top ten, might be quite an intriguing **personality test**. It could certainly be worth asking why *those* ten, rather than others. It could be quite illuminating, revealing just how we tick as individuals.

But if we're talking Bible passages rather than just single verses, some of you will know already that the one we're looking at this morning is one on my top ten list, at least. It might possibly take the top spot of all. Every time I read it there is something of wonder about Jesus' words here. It really is a **hair-on-the-back-of-the-neck** read for me, every time I come across it. It is like one of those **once-in-a-lifetime shots** at Wimbledon: how ever did they even get to that ball, never mind hit it back ... and keep it in ... and make a winner of it?

And that's the wonder of it for me. Jesus' opponents think that they have hit the **unreturnable serve** into his court. They think they will add a certain point to their side of the **scoreboard**. But Jesus' answer does not simply return the ball or save the point; instead, it tells us what the whole point of the game of tennis is. Or, dropping the tennis analogy, **Jesus answers a single-issue trick question with a profound principle covering the whole of life.**

For a couple of headings today, I'll just pick the two obvious phrases from his words:

The things that are Caesar's
The things that are God's

But let's set things in place before we come onto those profound answers. These words aren't just some random exchange with some random people some time during the life of Jesus. We're only a few days away from the cross. We're reading those last few interchanges - confrontations, really - that will lead to that inevitable moment. Jesus is saying things more and more pointedly, and his opponents are becoming more and more outraged. In the next chapter of Matthew, we've got Jesus saying, over and over,

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"

(Matthew 23:13)

He is deliberately pushing things to breaking point, because he knows not just that this is his path, but this is his time:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

So we looked, over the last three weeks, at three parables that Jesus told by way of response to a challenge from the chief priests and elders and Pharisees:

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

(Matthew 21:23)

What we have now is what follows on after those parables. Matthew isn't saying "then" in the sense of "immediately" ... but there is some degree of proximity in time implied. Perhaps we would even paraphrase it as "it wasn't long after this that ..."

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.

(Matthew 22:15)

If they can just get Jesus talking ... pushed in the right direction ... then maybe, hopefully, he will let something slip. He will let his guard down. He will say something incriminating that they can use against him, to bring him down. So ... having put their heads together, they come up with a question that they think is going to be unanswerable. Well, actually, *not* unanswerable: that's the whole point. Whichever way Jesus answers it, yes or no, he will seriously alienate some group of people - and basically **shoot himself in the foot**.

But they don't just drop the question on him. There are layers of sneakiness here. The Pharisees themselves don't come. They send their trainees, their disciples, youngsters who could more credibly be asking simply for some honest advice over a rather knotty theological problem.

And they sent their disciples to him, ...

(Matthew 22:16)

But ... this is curious ... people from totally the other end of the political spectrum come along too. Time for **alarm bells** to start ringing at this oddity?

And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, ...

(Matthew 22:16)

So the Pharisees are the ultra-religious types, who would see Roman rule of Judea as a kind of blasphemy ... and the Herodians, who we don't know much of apart from the name, we have to presume are *supporters* of the political situation, with Roman rule administered by successive rulers of the Herod family. How come these two groups are working *together* now? Surely that's a bit suspicious, isn't it?

Folks, bear that in mind if people ask you awkward questions. Perhaps at times we need to be wary, like those shady characters in police dramas, the kind that the detective goes up and asks if they can speak to Bill Reynolds, or whoever ... only to be answered by ***Who's asking?*** Folks, stay alert, in this modern world in which the Christian faith is not held in such great regard. Be ready to ask yourself questions like "Who's asking?" and "*Why* are they asking?"

Quite a few years ago - it was when we did have a bit of trouble here at the church: some of you will remember we even managed the front page of the **Camborne-Redruth Packet** - I was rung up one afternoon, totally out of the blue, by a local journalist asking me about the principles of church membership and church discipline. No names mentioned, no situations quoted, just this abstract enquiry. Did they really think I was so stupid that I wouldn't **connect the dots** and link that to the trouble that was being caused within the church at that time?

Folks, nowadays, too, stay alert. There are times when it is quite appropriate to be careful and guarded in our answers. *Who's asking?* and *Why?* can be very fair questions to ask - or at least ask ourselves.

Personally, I think I'd be even more suspicious when these people start their obviously-rehearsed **spiel** - just like the people who phone you up out of the blue and ask you if you're having a nice day, before they try to con you that your computer is playing up, or something like that.

... saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances."

(Matthew 22:16)

Obvious flattery. An invitation to speak freely ... *too* freely. Yes, actually, Jesus *is* “true” - he’s a person of total integrity. Yes, Jesus *does* teach the way of God truthfully - quite a surprising concession from the disciples of Pharisees! No, Jesus is *not* swayed by the outward appearances of people; he sees our *hearts*, and knows the needs so deep that we dare not confess them even to ourselves.

Interesting quote I found this week from J C Ryle on this point:

Let us beware of the flatterer. Satan is never so dangerous as when he appears as an angel of light. The world is never so dangerous to the Christian as when it smiles. When Judas betrayed his Lord, it was with a kiss.

But the flattery is imperfect: *not*, actually, the “you do not care about anyone’s opinions” - or, more strictly - “you are not bothered about people”. Actually, people *do* matter to Jesus. So this smarmy licking up to Jesus isn’t totally convincing. It is almost insulting flattery. And it doesn’t cover up the catch question which follows.

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

(Matthew 22:17)

Do they really think that Jesus can’t see the two-way catch to this? If he says that it *is* lawful to pay taxes to Caesar - and the one specific tax on that they have in mind, and we’ll come on to in just a moment - then he will alienate most of his Jewish followers, who greatly resented this further oppression from Rome. If he says it’s *not* lawful to, he will be seen as a powerful Jewish figure now spearheading a campaign of civil disobedience ... and the Romans aren’t going to stand for *that* in a province known to be particularly troublesome.

He’s stuck, isn’t he? Yes or No, he can’t win.

But Jesus does something more than just get out of the **straightjacket** they think he is well and truly trussed up in. He challenges their hypocrisy, for one. But instead of simply avoiding an answer, he transcends anything they could possibly have conceived of as any kind of answer. Even his convinced opponents end up awed by the total rightness of that all-encompassing rightness.

When they heard it, they marvelled.

(Matthew 22:22)

Folks, bear in mind that there are *lots* of questions that we don’t feel we’ve got good answers to at present. Like *Why is there evil in the world? Why doesn’t God intervene in this situation or that? - be it global warming or a member of my family with a serious illness.*

Just remember that these people came to Jesus with a question they thought was unanswerable ... and were given an answer that *totally* sorted everything. We

need to trust that God *still* has answers like that, that we shall see and hear on the Last Day, and say *At last! Of course!* And join in with the chorus of Heaven to sing:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

(Romans 11:33)

We could never have worked this out for ourselves ... but *now* we see how this all fits into the picture of the God who is good and great and gracious.

So, back to Matthew 22, and Jesus more bothered by the attitude of his questioners than by their actual question. There's almost a sharpness to Jesus' answer here that maybe already hints that their question can actually quite quickly be **walloped over the boundary** by a true master batsman at the crease .

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax."

(Matthew 22:18-19)

See, there is a specific tax now in Jesus' mind, one that needed the payment of a specific coin: a denarius. We've come across this unit of money before. In our modern money, it's the *living* wage for a day's work, pretty much. And notice here how Matthew says that they didn't dig out a coin from their wallets, but *brought* one.

And they brought him a denarius.

(Matthew 22:19)

There is maybe a hint there that these disciple Pharisees themselves didn't have any. This is just conjecture, but that *might* be because, just as Jesus was going to point out, this coin has an *image* on it, and that was quite possibly seen as a violation of one of the Ten Commandments:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

(Exodus 20:4)

It could be that Jesus and his disciples don't have a denarius between them. Or you could just see this request from Jesus as making some time to think what would be the most appropriate answer. Or maybe even to *pray* about the answer he was to give. Maybe we could do well to buy ourselves a bit of time to think and/or pray, when we are faced with tricky moments like this, do you think?

So ... a deceptively simple question ... with, just as we've seen over the last few weeks, really only one sensible answer.

And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's."

(Matthew 22:20-21)

And Jesus' answer now is a wonderful mixture: it's profound - it reaches to the very deepest parts of our beings - but it's not actually very precise - he speaks in terms of "whatever"s, without specifying where those limits or boundaries come. He's getting to the principle first, which is what we really must do if we're ever going to make sensible choices when it comes to the practicalities of things.

That's what you get throughout so much of the NT, if you stop and think about it. Instead of giving a numerical answer to the question of *How short can my skirt be*, we will read a profound but imprecise answer:

... women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, ...

(1 Timothy 2:9)

So Jesus answers here, back in Matthew's account, with profound imprecision:

Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

(Matthew 22:21)

Caesar makes claims on the lives of people around the Roman world, you see. It's actually there on the coinage in your pockets, if you know what the abbreviations stand for. The **denarius** minted under Tiberius, for example, read (in full - and obviously in Latin!):

Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the deified Augustus, chief priest

And yet, despite those words, *some* of Caesar's claims, Jesus is implying, are legitimate. In that realm, then yes,

"... render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, ..."

(Matthew 22:21)

Literally, that's "give back". Caesar - the figurehead of the Roman emperor, if you like, *has* given you worthwhile things. Taxation may be heavy, but you have the relative stability of Roman rule. Across the empire there are Roman roads to travel along, unlike that bandit-ridden track down from Jerusalem to Jericho. There's Roman law and the so-called *pax Romana*, the "Roman peace", which might not be perfect and totally impartial, but is a whole lot better than being ruled over by biggest and nastiest local warlord and his gang of bully-boys.

So yes, says Jesus, it's only appropriate that Caesar be given his due. You can see the same attitude and command later in the NT, too.

Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

(Romans 13:7)

Now technically, Jesus could have left it there, with the question answered. But, good answer though it is, it is only half the answer. There is a realm over which Caesar *does* have authority ... but there is more to life than that. There is a realm in which Caesar does *not* ... but which does not leave us without responsibilities.

“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

(Matthew 22:21)

Folks, do you see how sadly possible it is to major on part one of that, to the exclusion of part two? We are good citizens. We pay our taxes. We drive on the left. We wear our masks in crowded venues, because that is our civic duty. It is *good* that we do so. But if our life is only directed towards Caesar - or even **Boris** and **Rishi** and all - we're not at all done. Jesus told a story about a man who was rich and successful beyond his dreams in earthly terms, but had left God out of the picture:

But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

(Luke 12:20-21)

We call that the story of the Rich Fool. But Jesus' answer in Matthew 22 shows us that there are other kinds of fools, too. If you stop part-way through Jesus' answer, then perhaps you are just a *Responsible* Fool. You've done your duty to society at large, and maybe even your neighbour at hand ... but ... have you been responsible in your obligations towards God? What have you done about ...

“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

(Matthew 22:21)

So let's see, before we close, if we can make some sense out of, first

- **The things that are Caesar's**

How do you know they are Caesar's, though? A simple question, and an obvious answer. But with quite an implication for us, I think. What does an *image* on something imply?

And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, ...”

(Matthew 22:20-21)

The logic here is that the denarius is, even when it's in circulation, in some sense still Caesar's. You know that, because his image is stamped on the coin. And that is why Matthew's choice of wording here is "give back", or "render".

So what sort of things does Jesus include here, do you think? The question starts as one about taxes, so it's surely got to include that - as we've already seen. The government, or the state - or even the monarch or emperor, Jesus isn't making a comment here about any particular form of civic rule - they have authority to call a whole range of shots. Authority *and* responsibility too, of course.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

(Romans 13:1)

Not that our society doesn't permit us to press for change - and there certainly are some bad laws that could do with repealing, and consultations about new suggested legislation that could do with opposing - but, in general, whether it's speed limits on the roads, or whether or when we all need to switch to electric cars, or building regulations, or whether we must talk about centimeters and kilogrammes instead of inches and pounds, that's stuff that Caesar can legitimately tinker with to his heart's content, and we are simply called to

"... render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, ..."

(Matthew 22:20-21)

But there are things that are just beyond Caesar's ability. Parliament could probably write a law that defines all **dogs** as cats ... but it doesn't change any dog into a cat. And it can *call* marriage what *isn't* marriage, but it doesn't *make* it so. Caesar can make and refashion laws, but Caesar can't redefine reality.

And there are clearly areas where Caesar tries to overreach himself, and we have to say then that there is a higher authority, just as Jesus implied here too. Peter and others, perhaps you remember, arrested for preaching about Jesus:

"We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

(Acts 5:28-29)

But those are usually extreme situations, and instead of always looking first for where these general commands start to break down, we need to hear Jesus's general command for normal situations and apply that to ourselves first. So ...

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high

positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

(1 Timothy 2:1-2)

And that includes giving gladly to Caesar what it is proper for Caesar to demand from us. Things that have at least metaphorically Caesar's head already stamped on them.

But what about ...

- **The things that are God's**

Folks, I need to warn you: this is a biggie coming, if you've never seen it before. Think of that word *image*. Why did Jesus accept a denarius as belonging, in some sense, to Caesar? It was because the denarius had the relevant image stamped on it.

So we need to stop and think. Where is *God's* image stamped? What does he especially claim as his own, because of the presence of that image? Think a long, *long* way back.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

(Genesis 1:27)

Not just Adam and Eve, but human beings generally. You can see that the thinking is still there in the NT too, in James' writing about how we speak to one another:

With [our tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ... My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

(James 3:9-10)

Folks, theologians down through the centuries have wrestled with what this "image of God in mankind" means. Is it that we can think, for example? But ... what about a six-week old baby in the womb, that doesn't yet have a brain to think *with*? Are they not human? Probably all the answers that people have come up ever since those words were first written are not entirely convincing. But here is one thing that I'm sure that Jesus says it *does* mean:

Just as the coin "belongs to" Caesar because of the image imprinted on it, so does every human being, in some sense, "belong to" God, because of the image imprinted on us. He has claims on us. We are his subjects. There are things that are his *due*, things that must, says Jesus, be *rendered to God*.

"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

(Matthew 22:21)

We're not talking money, like Caesar's taxes. We're talking something far more significant than that. He owns us just simply because he created us, for starters. And many of us have gladly and publicly accepted that, when we came to him and called him not just Saviour, but *Lord*. We have recognised his right to rule over us, to call the shots in our lives, to set the boundaries to our lives, to define the objectives in pursuit of which we spend our lives. All we are doing is giving him back what is already his by right.

So I'm not talking here first and foremost on whether you choose to tithe your income. You can do that out of just habit - not a *bad* habit, I'm not saying that - but only a habit instead of really from your heart.

I'm not asking whether you stop to give thanks before every meal, or you come to church every Sunday. Those might be things that we can rightly give to God, yes. But anything like that can be just so much in the way of outward religion and show. I'm asking instead about your heart. Yes, it will overflow into outward things, of course:

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

(Psalms 111:1)

But it goes beyond and deeper than that:

Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

(Psalms 119:34)

Folks, as we think about Jesus saying, *give back to God the things that are his by right* ... is *this* how it strikes us? As if the words of Proverbs come to us as the words of God himself, and we reply Yes:

My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

(Proverbs 23:26)

Because, remember, we are following one who has already walked that road.

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "... 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'

(Hebrews 10:5-7)

Christ, who is *the* image - capital letter, if you like - of God himself:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

(Colossians 1:15)

And how do we “render to God what is God’s”? Perhaps supremely by making his image upon us more obviously evident.

Caesar’s head on this coinage gradually wore away. I remember collecting some “old pennies” when I was a kid. And if you found one in circulation that had to be at least 70 years old, it was difficult to make out that it was really **Queen Victoria’s head** on it.

But as we go on, the image of God should become *more* evident on us.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

(Colossians 3:9-10)

No longer just the image of Adam, the first man, who died. Instead into the image of the second man, Jesus Christ, who died - as we are about to remember - but then rose again.

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

(1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

(1 Corinthians 15:49)

recognise the responsibility of bearing God’s image