

Trinity 18, 19 October 2014, Proper 24

(Matthew 22.15-22)

Jesus said: 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Those Pharisees, intent on discrediting Jesus as a teacher were trying once again to trick him into saying something that they could take down and use in evidence against him. This time they thought that they had got him. Thoroughly fed up with paying taxes to the corrupt officials of a foreign power, they hoped to trick Jesus into saying either that it was against the law of Moses to pay taxes to the emperor, and then they could show him to the Roman authorities, or to say that it was lawful and then they could do him for blasphemy. But once again Jesus outwitted them. The coinage was quite clearly Roman – it had the emperor's head on it. It was issued under the laws and conditions laid down by Rome. The emperor had the right to levy tax, and could reclaim his own at any time.

The coins are quite clearly high on the list of things that are the emperor's. But there's a second part to Jesus's statement. What are the things that are God's, that Jesus says we should give to God?

Here's a brief history of stewardship. Forty-five years ago in 1969, this parish led by its vicar, Stanley Griffiths, adopted the principle of stewardship as a way both of ordering its life and drawing in as many people as possible into its activities and worship. Stewardship as a

principle is certainly not just about money. It is about giving back to God from the abundance of all the gifts that God gives to us, beginning with the gift of life itself. Contemporary society has a lot to say about rights; about the right to life, and about human rights in general and indeed, we should never lose sight of the value of every single human life. We should honour the image of God which is in every human being ever created, those past and those to come, but most particularly through the way in which we live alongside one another, those whose life we share in the present. We do need to uphold and if necessary, fight for the rights of all people everywhere. But however strong our sense of our rights, these follow in the wake of the fundamental truth that life itself is a gift from God and that from that gift, flows all our gratitude, our worship, and our obligation to offer something of that gift back to God, in the service of his people. God gives us life, and in that life, we all have different gifts and abilities; we can all do things that contribute to the building up of the people of God in the community where God has placed us to be – in building his church and in making more disciples. God gives us the gift of life, our skills and abilities, and the gift of time in which to use them. That's why, when we ask everyone to review the way in which they steward those gifts, it isn't just about giving money, it is about offering time and talents too. That is a fundamental principle of stewardship as it has been interpreted by the wider Church for many years. It's certainly a principle that has been strongly upheld in this parish, and long may that continue.

But inevitably, stewardship is about money too. When in the 1960s and 70s there was a big nationwide push for stewardship to become the chief

way in which parishes raised the money they needed to pay their way, it was strongly thought that it should replace all other kinds of fundraising, and parishes that went in for it seriously often insisted that it should be the only way of fundraising. That certainly happened here, and until comparatively recently, stewardship income, supplemented by gift aid, not only paid the bills, but enabled this parish to build up a surplus. But a lot has changed in forty-five years, not least the financial support that comes from the Church Commissioners, from central church funds. Forty-five years ago, parish clergy were largely funded centrally – stewardship giving in the parishes didn't have to take clergy stipends or pensions into account. Gradually that has changed and parishes have had to take on more and more of the direct costs of ministry until now, we have to find all of it and not only that, large parishes like ours are expected to find more, so that smaller parishes can survive.

In 2014, we are being asked to pay about £65,000 as our share of the cost of ministry. On top of that, we have all the expenses of running and heating and insuring this magnificent building, paying for repairs and maintenance, and for everything we need in order to maintain our activities and services. Meanwhile, and rather alarmingly, the amount coming in from the stewardship planned giving scheme is not only not increasing at a rate that enables us to keep up, but actually falling. There are lots of reasons for this, and there isn't time to list them, but the world economy has gone through more than six years of crisis and recession, and it is inevitable that everyone has been affected.

Amazingly, we've managed by and large to keep our heads just above the water line, due to your extraordinary generosity. But this year, there is a gap between what we know will come in, and what we know we must pay. That gap is an eye-watering £11,000, and the only way that we will meet it, is to dip into our reserves. We're very fortunate that we are able to do this – lots of parishes have nothing in reserve and some have been running on empty for a long time. We've gone through the budget with a scalpel, cutting down on expenditure wherever we can. We've begun to engage in additional fundraising. But with costs going up, and a two percent increase in ministry share expected next year, we really only have about three years before we too hit the bottom of the barrel.

Give to the emperor, the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'. What are the things that are God's? What are the gifts of God that we have received, that enable us to live the lives that we do – individually and corporately? What are the gifts that we not only feel an obligation to offer back to God, but want to offer back, freely and joyfully in his service, and as disciples of Jesus.

We need some new thinking, we need some new ideas. Some things are already happening – our new friends organisation is up and running and beginning to draw in money from outside our church fellowship that in time, we hope and pray, will pay for the conservation and preservation of this magnificent church building.

Two things: First thing - not all of us are members of the stewardship planned giving scheme. Many of us pledge a regular weekly, monthly or annual amount – but not all of us. That's guaranteed income. Can I urge you, if you feel that this is your church, your congregation, and value its continued presence witnessing and worshipping here, but have not yet committed to regular giving, to really consider doing it now.

Second thing - many of us who are tax payers, gift aid our contributions. That's a no-brainer! Last year we got more than £15,000 back from HMRC in tax refunds. That's your money that you've paid in tax. We've given to the emperor, the things that are the emperors. Fill in a simple form, and the emperor gives it back to the church. If you pay tax and you don't gift aid your giving, that's free money that the church isn't getting. Nobody likes paying tax – let's have some of it back to use in in God's service. If you are not gift-aiding your giving, then why on earth not? Do it now. If anyone has any questions about any of this, please speak to me or one of the churchwardens.

I've rather laboured the point. No-one, least of all me, likes talking about money. But rendering to God, the things that are God's often involves real heart searching and sometimes real sacrifice. Yet we are so blessed with all our many gifts. We have the resources already not just to survive as a church, but to extend and grow our ministry. We just need to release these gifts for God's work. St Augustine wrote: you are to be taken, blessed, broken and distributed that the work of the gospel may continue. As we take, bless, break and share the bread and wine of holy

communion together, let's pray that the presence of Christ in word and sacrament at this eucharist, through the power of the Holy Spirit, may guide and lead us in our thinking, and in our giving. In the words of our diocesan mission statement, we pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ.

Blessed be our God, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen.