

WEEKLY SERMON

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Conundrum

There are so many unique words in the English language and if you're anything like me you will have certain words that you particularly enjoy using, even though it's sometimes difficult to articulate why you like them. One of the words that I appreciate (along with 'plethora' and 'effervescent'!) is the word 'conundrum'. A conundrum is a complex and difficult puzzle, a hard question, or a riddle that's tricky to solve. It's the kind of word that you would use when 'problem' just doesn't cut the mustard.

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday (Matthew 22: 15-22) Jesus is faced with something that you could describe as a conundrum. The Pharisees, desperate for a way to trick Jesus into saying something that would give them reason to arrest him without the crowds turning on them, present him with the question, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" On the face of it, this is a lose-lose situation. If Jesus answers 'yes', then he could be perceived as in collusion with Rome, justifying Roman occupation and oppression of the Jews which, of course, would not be a popular answer among the Jewish people. On the other hand, if Jesus answered 'no', he would open himself to arrest for rebellion against the Roman Empire.

I think it is impossible not to admire how Jesus handles himself in the midst of the contention he finds himself in with the Pharisees. I'm certain that I would not have been able to respond as coolly as Jesus did when faced with such pressure. Jesus asks the Pharisees for a coin – a denarius – and asks them to identify whose image is on the coin. When they identify the emperor's face, Jesus' incredible response is: "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21). How can the Pharisees argue with that?!

In reading this passage, I am reminded of how, as much as Jesus was radical in many ways, he didn't come as a revolutionary against the Roman state. Jesus clearly sets a standard by which we can conclude that it is right for us to support our governmental authorities. This is backed up by Paul in Romans 13:1 which says, 'Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.'

This possibly presents us with a conundrum! I'm fully aware that our UK Government is far from perfect. Websites exist and even books have been published documenting political blunders and badly made policy decisions. And when mistakes happen, they are the talk of the town! In addition to that, I'm pretty sure no-one enjoys paying their taxes, however Jesus emphasises that as flawed as authority structures often are, we do generally benefit from them and it is God's will that we should be respectful of them. Even when we're feeling disgruntled, do we acknowledge that being in a position of leadership is never easy and pray for our government, asking that God is with our leaders in their decision making? Jesus' directive doesn't stop there. He tells us that whilst it's right to be loyal to government and other authorities in our lives, our greatest loyalty belongs to God. Let's not mix up these loyalties so that we prioritise talking about political agendas much more than we talk about the influence that Jesus has on our lives. Let's make sure we are devoted and faithful to God as our greatest loyalty.

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