

What are we for?

Background – violence in the Middle East. Cyrus (Persia = Iran) about to overrun Israel. Jesus living during the Roman occupation.

I'll be focussing on our gospel reading this morning – Jesus' dealing with a question from his opponents.

Sometimes, us parents and even grandparents may present a child with a difficult choice – 'Would you rather tidy your room or not go to the cinema this afternoon?!' Would you rather not go on your Xbox or do your homework?!' Yes, we can be tough at times! This uncomfortable aspect of childhood is featured in a popular children's book called, *Would you rather?'. Illustration on screen.* I wonder what you would choose?

These kinds of questions were part of a whole gamut of questions and answers popular in discussions with religious teachers in Jesus' day. They were one of the ways in which people learnt about what was laid down in the Torah. You asked a question. The rabbi asked you a question and between you there was then a vigorous engagement with what might be a tricky aspect of Jewish faith and practice. Jesus is clearly used to this and can field questions skilfully, including, as here, a question that was designed to trap him rather than increase understanding in the one posing the question.

The underlying question being asked by the religious leaders here was something like, 'Would you rather continue your popularity with the people and fall foul of the Romans by perhaps causing an uprising or openly support Roman taxation and be despised by the people?'

This encounter happens in Jerusalem in the week or so leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. He tells parables that enrage the chief priests and the Pharisees – the tenants in the vineyard, the invitation to the King's wedding feast, the 2 sons, one of whom said he would do what his father said, the other of whom refused, but then went and did it, whilst the first son didn't. Jesus' opponents saw these stories as aimed at deliberately provoking them so they come up with some questions that if answered one way rather than another would land him in trouble. The Herodians, as their name suggests, were broadly sympathetic to Roman rule under Herod, whilst the Pharisees, the more radical wing of Jewish religious leaders, would have resented the tax and what it represented, whilst resigning themselves to paying it.

Rather than focus on how this encounter might offer insights on how our faith impacts on our political allegiance (though it does), I want to consider how Jesus' response 'Give to Caesar what is due to Caesar and to God what is due to God' challenges us with the question, 'What are you for?'

This is the final week of Jesus' earthly life. Time is running out. This is his last chance to enable those gifted religious leaders to recognise who he is and to welcome that new way of entering into relationship with God, which Jesus calls the kingdom of God. Although these last parables and dialogues are provocative, they also hold within them an invitation to change before it's too late. The question for him is not so much about taxes but about the truth; in this case, recognising the image of God when faced with it in his person and ministry. 'Whose image (the Greek word is *ikon*) is this?' he asks them, holding up a Roman coin. They recognise Caesar's image, but not that of God, there, in front of them, in Jesus. He so longs for them to recognise God at work in him, to welcome the kingdom of God, a longing expressed in his lament over the city of Jerusalem shortly afterwards (Mtt 23.37-38). Instead they are fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy quoted in the synoptic gospels (Isa 6.9-10) – They have ears that are deaf, eyes that are blind and hearts that are hardened. Or in the intro to John's gospel that we hear at Xmas, 'He came to his own home and his own people received him not'.

There is irony in the words they use to address him; 'We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.' They intend these to be weasel words of flattery, but of course they are absolutely true. Jesus really was sincere, teaching the way of God, not swayed by the power or influence of others. He was an icon of God.

There's more than this, though, in his reply, '...give to God the things that are God's. Echoes here of the parable of the tenants in the vineyard which we looked at on our harvest Sunday. The tenants did not give the farmer the things due to him – the harvest of grapes which was the fruit of their labour but also the produce of *his* land. The fruit that Jesus might have hoped to see in his religious opponents was their teaching the people the ways of God in accordance with the truth. At the heart of this would be those two great commandments – Love God with all your heart mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself; commandments that he fleshed out in his ministry and his teaching about the kingdom of God. Instead, many of them seem to have been taken up with securing the best position for themselves and in making it hard for ordinary people to learn how best to love God and neighbour. Jesus spells this out a little later in his devastating 'woes' to the scribes and Pharisees (Mtt 23.1-26).

They refused to recognise in Jesus the ikon of God and they had lost touch with what they were there for. They would have been paying the Roman tax anyway (it was compulsory, after all). The bigger issue for Jesus was their failure to live out their calling to love God and neighbour and to equip others to do the same. They were the teachers and leaders, but they were fulfilling neither role in a way that benefitted their people. They had lost sight of what they were for.

Theresa May and Rory Stewart have recently written about their time in government and both apparently comment on how easy it is to lose touch with why you are elected as a member of parliament – it's primarily about making things better for your country but it often ends up being about playing power games and furthering your own interests. It is so easy to be distracted from what you are for.

Markus Rashford, the footballer, (*image on the screen*) gives football his due, but also God in all his campaigning and generous giving to end child poverty. He is a Christian who says, 'The faith we have in God is shown by the people we are.' What is he for? football, of course! But also living out love of God and neighbour because of his allegiance to Christ.

Whether we're 18 or 80 we can all consider what we are for, knowing that whatever it is it will reflect love of God and neighbour. It will be deeply connected to who we are and our circumstances. It may seem insignificant or foolish. Consider the woman who poured the precious ointment over Jesus (Mark 14.3-9); a small action, but daring and costly. Others mocked her. And Jesus said, 'She has done a beautiful thing to me....she did what she could'(verse 6,8). That's the most that is asked of us – to do what we can.

Nearing the end of his life St Francis, I think it was, said, 'I have done what was mine to do'. (*Repeat*) If you look up Francis' life you'll see that there were some things he was not at all good at, but he did what was his to do, and that was fruitful.

In one of his poems (*As kingfishers catch fire*) Gerard Manley Hopkins imagines every living creature singing, 'What I do is me, for that I came'. (*Repeat*) and he goes on to say, poetically, that when we do that others see in us the image (*ikon*) of Christ.

What am I for? is a question we can ask at different stages of our lives. It's prayer we can take to God.

What are we for? is a question any organisation or group can usefully ask from time to time too.

She did what she could. I have done what was mine to do. What I do is me. For that I came.