

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 14 December 2003 6:30pm

MARK 12 vv 13 - 27

Mark 12:13-27

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. [14] They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? [15] Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." [16] They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

[17] Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

[18] Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. [19] "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. [20] Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. [21] The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. [22] In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. [23] At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

[24] Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? [25] When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. [26] Now about the dead rising--have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? [27] He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

SERMON

In pre-Roman times, when one country invaded and conquered another, it was usually a pretty clear-cut affair. Remember when Nebuchadnezzar and Sennacherib led the Babylonians and Assyrians into Palestine? They stripped Judah and Israel of their wealth and took it all away. They destroyed any buildings and people who were not of use to them and took the remaining people into captivity as slaves and imposed their own culture and religion on them. Total defeat and asset-stripping were the ways of those times.

As times moved on, things became a little more civilised and a bit more complicated. The Romans realised that it was in their own interests to destroy as little as possible when they conquered another country. They took a long term view and realised that if a conquered country was allowed to thrive in relative peace and prosperity, then it was actually of more

use to the Roman Empire because that country could then pay regular taxes and tributes to the Empire, thus providing a long-term investment and costing less in terms of the military requirements of occupation.

That's why the Romans encouraged growth and trade. That's why they improved roads and transport in conquered countries like Britain. They taught us better hygiene, healthcare, economics, farming, manufacturing, metal-working, pottery, cloth-making ... they even taught us how to wash and build baths!

A stable, peaceful, prosperous, healthy country was of more use than one destroyed, pillaged and held under by overwhelming military force. Of course, the conquered country still had to suffer the indignity of foreign rule, but often the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. There was often only a small nationalistic resistance movement to cause trouble.

So, after the initial invasion, show of force and defeat, the invading Romans would back-off as soon as possible and encourage the newly conquered land to rebuild itself and establish a prosperous society. Ideally, the conquered country would become self-governing once again, there would be little attempt to change the culture or religion or to do anything which caused unrest provided that the Emperor received the taxes and money tributes as required.

If trouble arose, then the Roman grip would tighten again. If the country became peaceful and co-operative, then the grip would loosen. In general there were three levels of Roman control, following the aftermath of invasion:

- The harshest form of government was direct military rule, where the conquered country would be fully occupied by soldiers, governed by a military leader, reporting directly back to the Emperor. There would be no element of self-rule for the conquered country, and its own government and councils would be powerless. We can call that "Level 3 government"
- A lighter form of control was to have the country run by a Roman governor. The country itself would have its own parliament and councils, but all their decisions would have to be passed through the Roman governor before they could take effect. Taxes would be directly taken from the people by the Roman authorities. - That was, if you like, Level 2 government.
- Level 1 government was the least heavy-handed form of government, and was when the Romans allowed the country to govern itself in pretty much every respect, as long as that government paid the right proportion of taxes to Rome. Rome would have to agree on the form of government, and it would often have the last word in who was in overall charge. This was the least interventionist form of rule - and was of the greatest benefit, not only to the invaded country, but also to the Roman Empire.

Whichever of those three levels of government was in force at the time could be changed by Rome at any time in response to the situation in the conquered country. There are some parallels here with the way Northern Ireland is run. The ideal would be a self-governing province with democracy and peace. But, as we know, when that situation worsens, then Westminster steps in and dissolves the Northern Ireland assembly, and takes direct control from London. If fighting and unrest increases, then further military intervention becomes necessary in order to maintain law and order.

In Iraq too, we have seen how the relative ease of the initial coalition invasion has given way to an unsettled peace and a society that is difficult to police. Just how much that situation will change in the light of this morning's announcement of the capture of Saddam Hussein remains to be seen. The coalition objective is to hand power back to an Iraqi government as soon as the Iraqis can demonstrate that they have the organisation and infrastructure to maintain law and order and protect their own citizens. In the longer term, that is the only workable and desirable outcome.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman grip on Palestine was at the gentlest level. Rome had approved the puppet King Herod - Herod the Great - as the head of state. Military intervention was minimal, and the ruling body of the Jews - the Sanhedrin - was an almost fully empowered parliament

While many, like the Zealots, did not like the situation and would organise small terrorist uprisings and attacks, the general mood in Judea was one of a reluctant peace and co-operation. Aristocratic groups like the Sadducees actually quite liked being pals with the higher echelons of the Roman empire.

Then things changed. In 4BC, Herod the Great died and the kingdom was divided into three. To Herod Antipas he gave Galilee and Peraea. To Herod Philip he gave the wild district up in the north-east. To Archelaus he gave the south country including Judea and Samaria.

Antipas and Philip ruled wisely and well. But Archelaus was a complete failure. The result was that in A.D. 6 the Romans had to step in and introduce direct rule in Jerusalem and Judea. Things were so unsatisfactory that southern Palestine could no longer be left as a semi-independent kingdom. It had to become a province governed by a procurator - Cyrenius. Under Cyrenius, the official currency in Judea was the Roman currency of the denarius, and a three-level taxation system was imposed:

(i) A ground tax, which consisted of one-tenth of all the grain and one-fifth of the wine and fruit produced.

(ii) An income tax which amounted to one per cent of a man's income.

(iii) A poll tax, which was levied on all men from fourteen to sixty-five and on all women from twelve to sixty-five. This poll tax was one denarius - difficult now to know exactly what that was worth. It was the tax which everyone had to pay simply for the privilege of existing.

Later, in AD26, Pontius Pilate came to power as governor. Pilate didn't like Jews and would, it seems, have been quite happy to see them disappear as a nation. Pilate's procuratorship consisted of one provocation of the Jews after another. He broke all precedent by bringing into Jerusalem military insignia bearing the image of Caesar in flagrant defiance of Jewish law. He removed them only when the Jews offered to die at the hands of his soldiers rather than consent to such blasphemy. He brutally suppressed protest by planting armed soldiers, disguised as civilians, among the Jewish crowds. Anyone found to be expressing anti-Roman sentiment was executed.

So Judea and the region where Jesus and the disciples were, was in a politically precarious position - stuck in Level 2-type government with a Roman Governor who had leanings towards a military, Level 3 type of government. And on the other hand we have the Sanhedrin, the council of the Jews, wanting desperately to get back to a Level 1 - type government where they could govern themselves and not have need of a governor. One group in particular - the Herodians - were the political driving force behind this endeavour. Essentially they were a secular movement, more concerned with Judea's political and cultural dignity than with theological issues. Their aim, and the aim of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and all the eldership of the Jews, was to demonstrate to Rome that they were capable of running a stable, peaceful country without the need of a Roman Governor.

And that is the political situation into which the adult Jesus emerges. And immediately, he's a threat. He has a large following and was popular with the people. Some of the people were calling him The Messiah and were looking to him to deliver them from the Roman occupation. This was the last thing that the Herodians wanted - he was trouble. He had to go. And the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Sanhedrin were all in agreement. They all had their own agendas as well - but they needed Jesus out of the way because he was a threat to stability and the possible relaxation of the Roman grip.

The Sanhedrin did not have the power to sentence and execute without the Governor's consent. And, at the moment, they knew that they would not get that consent. We have to assume that Pilate, if he knew about Jesus at all, was not aware of the threat.

The only way that the Herodians and Sanhedrin could dispose of Jesus was to try and get incontrovertible evidence that Jesus was a threat to Rome, and then hand him over to Pilate directly. Once executed, he would be out of the way, his followers would disperse and the threat would be gone. The Sanhedrin would also have looked good in the eyes of the Romans for handing over a known agitator - and the chances of achieving a level 1 government would be increased.

But how to do it? How to get Jesus into a position of being an undesirable in the eyes of Pilate?

Then the Herodians come up with a plan. Ask Jesus whether it is right to pay taxes to Rome or not. If he said "no" then they could cart him off to Pilate, with several witnesses and Jesus would have been executed there and then. If Jesus said "Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Rome", then his followers would desert him and his influence would be lost. Either way, Jesus would no longer be a threat to the political aims of the Jews. They couldn't go wrong - or so they thought!

So they present their question to Jesus, in front of a huge crowd of people. *Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"*

Expecting a "yes" or "no" answer, they must have been very disappointed when Jesus asks them to give him a Denarius.

The common Roman denarius was a small silver coin and was the only coin acceptable for imperial tax payments. When Jesus asked them to tell Him whose portrait and inscription were on it, they replied, Caesar's. The portrait (εικο | v, "image") was probably that of Tiberius Caesar and the inscription read

in Latin: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus” and on the reverse side: “Chief Priest.” This inscription originated in the imperial cult of emperor worship and was a claim to divinity, which was particularly repulsive to Jews. To use Caesar’s coinage was to acknowledge his authority and the benefits of the civil government it represented and consequently the obligation to pay taxes.

So Jesus takes the coin and asks whose image is on it. “Caesar’s”, comes the reply. “Well” says Jesus, “If it’s got Caesar’s image on it, it obviously belongs to him - so give it back to him!”

Barclay’s insight into the ancient world is very helpful here: [In regard to coinage the ancient peoples held three consistent principles.](#)

(i) Coinage is the sign of power. When anyone conquered a nation or was a successful rebel, the first thing he did was to issue his own coinage. That and that alone was the final guarantee of kingship and power.

(ii) Where the coin was valid the king’s power held good. A king’s sway was measurable by the area in which his coins were valid currency.

(iii) Because a coin had the king’s head and inscription on it, it was held, at least in some sense, to be his personal property. Jesus’ answer therefore was, “By using the coinage of Tiberius you in any event recognize his political power in Palestine. Apart altogether from that, the coinage is his own because it has his name on it. By giving it to him you give him what is in any event his own. Give it to him but remember that there is a sphere in life which belongs to God and not to Caesar.”

This was not what the Herodians wanted hear. It wasn’t the anti-Roman speech they wanted in order to convict him. Neither was it the simple “yes” that would have got him into trouble with the people. It was an inspired and sensible answer that no-one could argue with! The Herodians, and the Pharisees were defeated. Jesus also took the opportunity of exposing their hypocrisy in trying to trick him - so they must have gone away with their tails between their legs. Luke tells us that *They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.* [Luke 20:26]

But Jesus didn’t stop there. In the same breath he says “Give back to God what belongs to God.” This is a particular stab at the Herodians who were not even particularly religious. Jesus is here giving them a challenge about their own lives.

And for us, Jesus here is giving us two valuable lessons: one about how Christians are to respond to civil government, and another which tells us about the limits of civil government.

One verse in the Bible that’s always been a bit difficult to fathom is Romans 13:1 *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

A difficult verse to accept if you’re in a country where Christians are persecuted. A difficult verse too for the Jews in a Roman-ruled Palestine!

On the whole the New Testament lays down three principles about how Christians relate to civil authority.

(i) The state is ordained by God. Without the laws of the state life would be chaos. Society cannot work unless it agrees to obey the laws of living together. The State, whether god-fearing or atheist provides many benefits: No individual person could have their own water supply, their own sewage system, their own transport system or their own social security system. The state is the origin of many of the things which make life liveable.

(ii) No-one can accept all the benefits which the state gives and then opt out of all the responsibilities. In the words of one historian: *"It was the glory of the Roman Empire that it brought peace to a troubled world. Under its sway the regions of Asia Minor and the East enjoyed tranquillity and security to an extent and for a length of time unknown before and probably since. The ordinary person, under Roman rule, found himself in a position to conduct his business, provide for his family, send his letters, and make his journeys in security, thanks to the strong hand of Rome."* It is still true that no-one can conscientiously receive all the benefits which living in a state gives, and then opt out of all the responsibilities of citizenship. Yes, we can protest about things - that is our right. Protest about the Council Tax all you like, but until things change, we have a responsibility to pay it.

(iii) But thirdly, there is a limit. If the state remains within its proper boundaries and makes its proper demands, the individual must give it his loyalty and his service; but in the last analysis both state and man belong to God, and therefore, should their claims conflict, loyalty to God comes first. But it remains true, that, in all ordinary circumstances, a Christian should be every bit as good a citizen - or better - than any other person.

But, as I said earlier, Jesus didn't stop there. He wasn't just giving us a lesson in our civil responsibilities. He uses the denarius, with the image of Caesar on it, as an illustration to make a wider point. The book of Genesis tells us that we are made in God's image. We all, as it were, bear his inscription. Whether saint or sinner, we have God's mark stamped on us. God is our creator and we belong to him. How unreasonable is it that we should give ourselves back to him?

The Jews had a choice about paying their taxes to Rome. They could either pay the denarius back to Caesar when asked, or they could run the risk of having it taken from them by force at a time of Caesar's choosing! And isn't there a parallel there with our lives? Our lives belong to God and we can choose to give that life to him in tribute now ... or run the risk of having it snatched from us in punishment.

I wonder how well you remember the struggles you went through at the time when you made your first commitment to follow Jesus as your Lord. The challenge you faced was to decide whether or not to hand over your life to Christ. You regarded your life as **your** life - something that you owned and something that only you had any rights and claims over.

Maybe you, like CS Lewis, were quite prepared to hand over your wealth, your status, your job, your time, your commitment, your energy and everything you owned - with the single exception of that thing which we call "me". There was a fear that the thing that we call "myself" would somehow be snapped up by God and put through some kind of food-

processor and the result would be something no longer recognisable as “me” and left in a state that could never be returned to us.

We reached the point where we accepted that God’s claims over us were entirely reasonable ... but we had a fear - a wonder if God himself was also “reasonable” in that more comfortable sense of the word. Would we become brainwashed to the point where we couldn’t even recognise ourselves? CS Lewis claimed that he was never given any reassurance about this. And I doubt if any of us were either. What was required of us was a leap of faith - a letting go - an all-or-nothing plunge.

I think the nearest thing we can get to a reassurance that God is “safe” is what Jesus tells us in tonight’s passage. When we give our lives to God, we’re not handing over something which belongs to us: we are giving back something which belongs to him anyway. What better place for your money than the bank who issued it? What better place for your life than in the hands of the God who created it?

The second episode in tonight’s passage concerns a visit to Jesus by the Sadducees. The Sadducees, as we have already discovered, only accepted the first five books of the OT as genuine scripture. They did not believe in angels, a resurrection, life after death or the laws that the Pharisees were so fond of. They were mostly aristocratic and wealthy, and most of the Temple priests were Sadducees. They were a fairly small party but had a significant voice on the Jewish supreme Council - the Sanhedrin.

The Sadducees, like the Pharisees, the Elders, the Scribes and the other parties also had a problem with Jesus. And their problem was more theological than political. The Sadducees were not really that worried about Roman Rule in Palestine. It may be that they actually benefited from rubbing shoulders with well-to-do Romans. By and large they were left to get on with their office untroubled by the Romans. After that unfortunate episode with Pontius Pilate early in his procuratorship, the Temple was relatively safe.

So when they come to Jesus with yet another question designed to trick him, we must assume that their motive this time was not the same as that of the Herodians and Pharisees. The question - essentially about the resurrection - was not designed to get him into trouble with the Romans. Whatever Jesus’ answer was going to be about the resurrection, it probably wouldn’t have changed his standing with the disciples and the other followers. The question seems designed merely to irritate the Pharisees, who did believe in the resurrection and life after death. Again this is strange because the Pharisees and Sadducees were, for once, united in their desire to get rid of Jesus. This seems like a bit of an own-goal on their part. Perhaps they were just having a bad day.

The question is long, highly improbable, and poor Mark has to reproduce it in full in his gospel ... usually Mark kept things as brief as possible. The question concerned a thing called the Levirate Law found in Deut. 25:5-10:

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. [6] The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

[7] However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to me." [8] Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," [9] his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." [10] That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsanctified.

Incidentally you ought to be aware that the traditional duties of a Best Man at a wedding are partly based on this law - so next time you're asked to be a Best Man, give some serious thought to what you might be letting yourself in for!

Anyway, the Sadducees take this law and elaborate it into a highly implausible story concerning seven brothers who, one after the other, marry this poor childless multiple-widow. "In heaven" they ask, "whose wife will she be?"

Jesus retaliates with a double attack. *[24] Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?"*

Here, Jesus is telling them that they don't know their own scriptures - not that they didn't know the content of the scriptures, but that they didn't understand their true meaning. Secondly, he tells them that they don't know the power of God either.

He tries to explain that the order of things in heaven is very different from the order of things here on earth. In Heaven there is no more need of things like marriage because we are more like the angels - transformed from needing the physical attachments we have here on earth. I'm sure the topic of what Heaven is like could occupy several sermons and Bible studies all to itself, and all too often we find ourselves wondering what it will be like.

- When we are resurrected, what age will we be? The age when we died, or will we be resurrected in the prime of early adulthood? If so, what about children - will they be resurrected as adults?
- When I'm resurrected, will I still have that birthmark?
- Will I be reunited with my cat or dog?
- Is there chocolate in heaven?

These are the sorts of questions that spring to mind, and have about the same relevance as the question that the Sadducees raised about marriage.

Unfortunately, we don't have the language or imagination to know what the order of things will be like in Heaven, so I don't propose we spend too much time pondering it. I think we have to resist the urge of trying to picture heaven merely in terms of this earth with the nasty things taken away. Very much like the Sadducees, we too have no idea of the way in which God makes all things new. Unlike the Sadducees, however, we do believe that God knows what he's doing - and we're prepared to trust him.

Jesus, of course, realised that the Sadducees are really trying to make him look silly in front of the crowd by stumbling over their question and thus make the idea of a resurrection look silly. So Jesus tackles them further on their knowledge of scripture. The

Sadducees affirmed that the Pentateuch - the first five books of the OT - contained no hint of life after death so Jesus points them at Exodus 3:5-6 where Moses encounters the voice of God in the burning bush: *"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."* [6] Then he said, *"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."*

I **am** the God of your father. I **am** the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob..... I **am** present tense!

Then Jesus adds: *He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.*

The Sadducees were not stupid. They knew that Jesus was saying that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still alive. Their deaths are recorded in history and Jesus was now saying that they are alive - therefore Jesus was affirming a resurrection. The only counter-attack that the Sadducees could have used was to have said that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were dead as door-nails not a wise move in front of an enthusiastic crowd! So they shut up and went away.

So that brings us to the end of tonight's passage and the two questions which were designed to entrap Jesus into saying things which would either make him unpopular with the people or with the Roman authorities. The score at the end of that round is definitely two-nil to Jesus, with an own-goal by the Sadducees!

As Christians, we are to do our duty to the civil authorities as long as those duties do not conflict with our duty to God. We should give back to the world what belongs to the world, but give back to God what belongs to him in trust.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were men who trusted God and received a promise that God would never abandon them. Jesus tells us that they are alive and that God is still their God. The relationship that God forges with men who trust him will not end at physical death.

In the words of Paul in Romans 8: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? [38] For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, [39] neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Amen.