

# *"Mine, Caesar's or God's?"*

<b><u>Occasion</u></b>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<b><u>Day, Date &amp; Time</u></b>	Sunday 8 <sup>th</sup> November 2009 at 18:30
<b><u>Basis</u></b>	Mark 12:12-17
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	Mark 12:12-17 (Matthew 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26)
<b><u>Songs</u></b>	from Mission Praise: 5, 191, 37, 69, 229, 590, 857
<b><u>Author/Speaker</u></b>	Paul Rydon

---

What is at the centre of your life?  
    What is that drives you?  
    What is that central thing  
        or person  
        or philosophy  
    or ideal  
        that defines your values,  
        defines the way you think?

How do you derive the values  
    that govern and control your life?  
    Is there something that stands at the very heart of your being  
        that defines who you are?

You may never have thought about it.  
    Most of us don't!  
    But at the core of every person is something  
        which drives us,  
        which controls our values,  
    how we live,  
        our priorities,  
        our loves and our hates,  
        our time and our life.

I don't know if you ever watch Casualty on BBC 1.  
    But Ruth,  
        the young female Dr Winters is driven only by ambition.  
        She cares nothing for any one else's feelings.  
    Her only drive is ambition  
        and she will lie,  
        hurt other people's feelings

reject love  
solely to get on in her job.  
Her ambition has become the sole driver in her life.  
and the picture is horrible.

Of course,  
she's only a television character.  
She's not real.

Yet there is a lesson here.  
Television,  
because it exaggerates,  
because it caricatures,  
allows us to observe the extremes to which we as human beings can go,  
when driven by unhealthy ideals.

As an aside, there is a problem here.  
Because if we are to see these things,  
we need to retain a critical faculty in our thinking  
and I'm not sure  
that many people look beyond the surface of the programme  
and see what is being said.

Indeed many would argue that we are being conditioned by what we see  
rather than retaining the critical faculty.

But that is not where I want to take you this evening.

First then let us look at what is going on in the world of Jesus  
back in the first century,  
when this man,  
the Son of God  
is walking the streets of the Holy Land  
teaching the people before he goes to the cross.

Jesus is in Jerusalem,  
only a few days from his arrest and crucifixion,  
though none of the people in the story are aware of that,  
for events unfolded very rapidly.

Jesus' opponents were at this time intent on undermining his popularity  
and if possible removing him from the public square,  
so that then they might stand a chance of silencing him.

This probably happened on the Tuesday of what the church calls Holy week;  
after his triumphal entry,  
but before the Last Supper,  
Gethsemane  
and the Cross.

That morning,  
the Pharisees and the Herodians hatched a little plot to trap him,  
and sent their people  
to trick him into saying something that could be used against him.

The Pharisees for their part were against Roman occupation of their country  
and hated the Roman tax which the occupying force imposed.  
Indeed some refused to pay the tax,  
believing that paying it was an implicit acceptance of the Roman presence  
and effectively legitimised the regime.  
Rome of course was well aware of this undercurrent of rebellion  
and would quash any signs of uprising;  
brutally if necessary.  
Complaints of heavy-handed policing certainly didn't wash with them.

The Herodians on the other hand  
supported the Jewish King Herod,  
whom the Romans had installed as puppet king.  
These people were seen as collaborators  
and hated by many.

So here we have two groups of people of opposing views  
joining forces to bring Jesus down.  
Confronting him with trick questions.

They start with flattery.

You can almost hear their simpering tones:

*"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"*

*(Mark 12:14)*

But then: 'Bang'

*"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"*

*(Mark 12:14-15)*

A lesser man would have preened himself,  
been lulled by the flattery  
and caught off guard by the question.  
But not our Lord,  
who knows the hearts of men.

"Why are you trying to trap me?" he asks.

"Bring me a denarius and let me have a look."

There were a number of currencies circulating in Palestine at the time,  
hence the money changers in the temple;  
though they were also needed to change money into the temple coinage.

The denarius was silver Roman coin and there are a few in the British Museum today.

I think we have a picture: *(Readers see the last page of this paper.)*

The first is Anthony and Cleopatra's.

The second is the one struck for Brutus

and the third one is that of Caesar Augustus. <sup>(1)</sup>

He was the one who ordered the census

which caused Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem where Jesus was born.

Just a reminder that the Bible,

far from being a fable,  
is rooted in history.

The denarius was worth about a day's pay  
and the Roman tax had to be paid in Roman coinage.

So they bring him a coin and he asks whose portrait it displayed,  
and of course they reply,  
"Caesar's"

Then of course came Jesus' famous reply,  
"Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."  
and Luke says that "they were unable to trap him in what he had said in public,  
and astonished by his answer,  
they became silent."  
(Luke 20:26)

On all counts it was a brilliant reply.  
Had he said "Yes", they should pay the tax,  
many of his followers would have been disenchanted with him,  
especially Judas Iscariot who was, it is believed  
one of the zealots who opposed Roman rule  
and was looking for the Messiah to foment an uprising  
and overthrow the occupying powers.  
If he had answered "No",  
the Herodians would have shopped him to the Romans  
and sought to get him arrested for sedition.

But it also challenged those who sought to trick him  
as to their personal walk with God,  
their priorities  
and their integrity as individuals.

-----  
Like so much of what Jesus said,  
his reply ricochets down the ages,  
and challenges each of us  
as to where we stand in our personal lives.

Jesus reply challenges each of us as to our response,  
our relationship  
and our obligations to the State  
and to God.

And this evening I want to look at these two  
and to add a third,  
our response, relationship and obligations to ourselves.

I add the third because today we live in an egocentric world  
where self is king.

So let's start there.

What are our response,  
relationship  
and obligation to ourselves.

And how do we satisfy our personal needs?

A close relative of mine recently asked me -  
we had been talking together about what we each do -  
how we spend our time -  
and he asked me

"And what do you do for yourself?"

The question was absolutely genuine.

He was concerned that I had taken on too much.  
That I wasn't getting enough time to myself.  
That there was no time for me to relax.  
But the question and its answer still puzzle me.  
Why should I have to do things for myself?

It seems that we in this generation are self-obsessed.

We put ourselves and our needs at the centre of the Universe.

I know that there is a lot of low self-esteem out there.

Teenage girls are reported to be so dissatisfied with their bodies  
that many would be willing to undergo plastic surgery  
to improve their looks and their figures.

I guess this is a product of the celebrity culture imposed on us by the media.

The modern answer is to learn to love yourself.

Then once you are strong and self-possessed,  
you can get on with life and learn to love others.  
But you must put 'yourself first' is the creed.

This whole attitude has even crept into the Christian world,

with many worship songs concentrating more on my blessings,  
my love for God,  
my happiness,

rather than worshipping God for being God  
and praising Jesus for his great work.

There's even a book out there by a prominent and highly respected Christian minister  
called 'Totally forgiving ourselves'  
claiming you can only forgive others once you've forgiven yourself.

But then there is another side to this '*me*' mentality.

This individualism we see all around us.

In May 2003, Nick Spencer published a booklet called 'Beyond Belief'.

It was a report of a project conducted in 2007,  
where forty non-religious agnostics  
were interviewed regarding their attitudes toward religion,  
Christianity, the Church, their own belief systems etc.  
And the results were highly revealing.

Two aspects are worth highlighting.

The first he calls 'Guerrilla Morality'.

(that's Guerrilla as in guerrilla warfare  
rather than Gorilla as in monkeys and primates)  
The majority of these people interviewed had their own self-designated moral standard,  
which by definition they were able to keep.

It was their own  
and no-one could question it,  
nor accuse them of being hypocrites.  
This was in contrast to Christians,  
who in their view were all hypocrites,  
because they claimed high moral ground which they didn't keep.

The second he calls 'Totalitolerance'.

In their view, the greatest sin is intolerance,  
of which all religious people are guilty.  
They have their own standard of tolerance, which boils down to  
'you must be tolerant of my views, but I don't have to be tolerant of yours'.

The Christian view of self is, of course,  
quite different.

"You are not your own, you were bought at a price" (1  
Corinthians 6:19)

says Paul when chiding the Corinthians on their bad behaviour.

Jesus says, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever loves his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it."* (Mark 8:34-35)

There is no room for self in the service of Christ.  
We are unworthy sinners,  
saved by grace.

Yet we are of great value.

We are made in the image of God,  
we have been restored by his grace into his family.  
We are sons and daughters of God.

We are his ambassadors on earth,  
temples of the Holy Spirit,  
and members of the Body of Christ, his Bride.

It doesn't get much better than that.  
With the knowledge and experience of all these blessings,  
there should be no room for low self-esteem.

-----

What then of our relationship to the State?

Jesus says, "Give to Caesar that which is Caesars's." (Mark 12:?)

Paul says, "... submit to the authorities,  
for there is no authority but that which God has established. (Romans 13:1)

- and he tells Titus to remind the Christians in Crete  
to be subject to their civil rulers. (Titus 3:1-2)

It seems to be a principle running right through Scripture  
that the civil authorities are given their authority by God.

In our society,  
Authority' as a concept is despised.  
'No-one has the right to tell me what to do!' is the creed.  
But we must remind ourselves that man has no intrinsic authority,  
for all authority comes from God.

In a democratic society,  
as ours supposedly is,  
power is given by the people to those we believe or hope will rule us well.  
Sadly, we have to choose from amongst those  
whom it appears seek power and influence,  
rather than the good of the nation's people.  
But that may be a jaundiced view.

I believe, as Christians,  
we have a responsibility to vote.  
Though I am aware that some believe that they should detach themselves from the world,  
though I think that view is contrary to the teachings of Scripture.  
I also think that we have a responsibility where we can  
to influence those who draft and pass the laws of our land  
so that they are just and good,

As a rule we should be model citizens;  
keeping the law,  
respecting authority  
and upholding those whose task it is to enforce it.

But there will come a time  
when the laws of the State  
will contravene the laws of God.  
It's already beginning to happen.

What will we do then?

Jesus is of course answering a trick question,  
not giving a treatise on how to live in a Godless world,  
but his answer is a powerful guide as to how we should react.

So our **response** is to be obedient to the State,  
where we can do so without disobeying God.

Our **relationship** is that we are a part of the State  
and hence we should play our part as upright citizens,

supporting our fellow men  
in the creation and maintenance of a just,  
fair  
and compassionate society.

And our **obligations** are to pay our taxes  
and in our society to vote.

-----

Finally then,  
give to God what is rightly God's.  
This is the sting in the tail of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees.

We have already seen that if we give God what is God's  
then that means ourselves.

We are his  
and we can do nothing less than give ourselves back.  
But Jesus says that if we do  
we will get our life back again.

Because we are God's creatures,  
made like him and for him.  
Made to give and receive love.  
Made to have relationships,  
with God himself  
with our fellows,  
with our husbands and wives  
our parents and our children -

Because we are made that way  
These things will fulfil our most basic needs.

We are at our most fulfilled when we are liberated as God's children  
to live 'justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.'  
(Micah 6:8)

There is, however, a cost.  
Jesus spoke of the difficulties we would have in the world,  
because they would hate us as they hated him.  
Because of the Christian foundations of our culture,  
few of us here have felt that hate in practice.  
We may have endured ridicule, even scorn,  
but not much more.  
But the tide of Christian consensus is ebbing fast,  
indeed has almost disappeared from the landscapes of Britain.  
Laws are being passed which will be used to restrict our liberties  
and our freedom to follow our conscience.  
There will I believe be difficult times ahead  
for Christians and the Church.

A time is coming when giving to God what is God's  
will clash with giving to Caesar what is Caesar's.

But be of good courage says our Lord,  
for I have overcome the world.

The God whom we serve is the same God  
who sent his Son into our world to bring us back to him  
And as we nestle in his arms

he frees us from sin and all the restraints of evil  
to be his glorious sons and daughters  
and he gives us great joy as we serve him here  
in the sure and certain knowledge that we will overcome while here  
and that he will return to take us to himself.

That is my hope  
and my conviction  
and I pray that it is yours too.

So give to Caesar what is Caesar’s  
and to God what is God’s

To him be all the glory.

Amen

- (1) To avoid any possible copyright violation, I have not included in the web version of this sermon, pictures of the denarii referred to. They may be found at the following links:

**Anthony and Cleopatra**

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/cm/s/silver\\_denarius\\_of\\_cleopatra.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/silver_denarius_of_cleopatra.aspx)

**Brutus**

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/cm/s/silver\\_denarius\\_of\\_marcus\\_juni.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/silver_denarius_of_marcus_juni.aspx)

**Caesar Augustus**

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/cm/s/silver\\_denarius\\_of\\_augustus.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/silver_denarius_of_augustus.aspx)

Paul Rydon – 8 November 2009