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West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Luke 20:20-26

(Baptism)

If there is one thing very many people like complaining about, it is paying tax. It's not nice to have to give a chunk of what you have earned, of what is rightfully yours, to the government. But despite the fact that people dislike paying tax, they nevertheless pay it. Because that is the law. That is what you have to do if you are a resident in this country.

People complaining about paying tax is not a new thing – it's a universal phenomenon, and have been for many many years.

At least in this country we know what the tax is used for and we benefit from it – in Biblical times things weren't quite the same. The poor Jews had to pay lots of different kinds of taxes, and when the Romans started ruling them, these taxes increased. They didn't have a clue what all the money was used for, and paying the taxes made them poor. This led to a huge revolt, when Jesus was probably just a young boy, and it's been a sensitive issue ever since.

If we keep all this in mind, it will be easier to understand the passage we read from Scripture this morning.

The Jewish religious leaders of the time, called the Pharisees, wanted to get Jesus out of the picture. They believed themselves to be the bearers of the message of God, and they forced people to obey millions of laws in order to please God. They didn't like it even one bit that Jesus was healing people and doing miracles and telling his followers that all God expected of them was love. This didn't fit in with the Pharisees' picture of believing in God, and they were so caught up in the quest not to lose any of their followers, that they didn't even realise that actually Jesus was on their team too, he wasn't their opponent.

Now I know it's hard to believe that in the days before facebook and twitter and mobile phones with cameras that news could travel fast, but because talking to each other face to face was their only means of communication in those days, they were very good at it. And stories spread like wildfire.

You could literally crown or hang yourself with what you said in public in Biblical times.

So the Pharisees decided to trap Jesus. They sent spies over, their own people pretending to be followers of Jesus, to ask him a trick question. They knew that whatever he answered, he would hang himself with those words.

They asked him whether they should pay tax to Caesar or not. This indeed was a trick question, because if Jesus said *no*, he would immediately be branded as rebelling against Roman authority, and with the tax revolt still fresh in everybody's minds, he would be thrown in jail immediately. But if he said *yes*, he would most certainly lose a lot of his followers, because they believed that in Jesus they had a new future, but paying lots of taxes couldn't be part of that future, because the taxes killed them little by little.

So the Pharisees were very proud of themselves, because they thought that either way, they would be rid of Jesus now.

But they were wrong. Jesus saw right through them, and his answer had them speechless.

He said: Show me a denarius. A denarius was a silver coin, worth about a day's wages.

He didn't ask for the coin because he didn't have any on himself, he did that because he wanted to show them that all of them were using the money.

And then he asked them: whose image is on this coin? Caesar's, they replied. Caesar believed himself to be a God, so to even have a coin like this in their possession would be really hard for the lawful Jews, because the 2nd commandment said that you were not allowed to make/have an image of any other god.

But the fact of the matter was that these coins belonged to Caesar, and that people had to give him back what belonged to him.

But Jesus didn't stop there – that wasn't the end of his argument. He said that just like that – just like they had to give to Caesar what is rightfully his, they have to give to God what is rightfully his.

The coins were Caesars', because he minted it, his image was on it. So whether they liked it or not, they had to pay him their taxes.

In Genesis 1:26 we read that people are made in the image of God. So just like the coins, bearing the image of Caesar, were made by Caesar and belonged to him, just like that, people, bearing the image of God, were made by God and belong to him. And therefore, whether they like it or not, they had to give themselves to God, because they belonged to him.

Just like the image of the Caesar on the coins was a proclamation of his kingdom wherever the coins were used, just like that people, made in the image of God, should proclaim the kingdom of God wherever they go.

And like I said, this brilliant answer of Jesus left the crowd speechless.

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Although we live many years after all this happened, things haven't really changed at all. Because we still pay tax today, and pride ourselves in the fact that our money is worth a lot. All over the world people know that the pound has value, and *that* makes the United Kingdom a desirable place to live, a country that's opinion is worth listening to.

We pay our tax, because we know we have to. Just like that, we have to pay our due to God too. Because we are made in his image, we belong to him, and we should show that to the world.

It's like paying tax, just more important. Nobody will risk not paying tax, because that might land you in jail, and could mean the end of your life as you know it.

But why then, are some people reluctant to give to God what is God's? To proclaim the kingdom of God through what we do and say is not a burden, and it doesn't put any restrictions on us, like some people might think. Quite the opposite, actually. To live in such a way that others can see we belong to God, is a huge privilege. It *is* a responsibility, but one that God trusts us with.

And isn't it a huge honour to think that God could have proclaimed his kingdom here on earth in any way he wanted to, but he chose to use people to do it for him? He chose you and me to show the people around us what life really is about.

And if we don't do this, we won't literally end up in jail like when we don't pay our taxes, but we *will* restrict ourselves, we won't be able to enjoy the freedom of belonging to God.

Of knowing that he is in charge of our lives, of knowing that he takes care of us every moment of every day, of knowing that when things don't make sense to us, God still knows where he is headed with us.

Who can receive all that, *and* salvation, and not *want* to give something back?

(....., just like all of us, your wee boy, was also created in the image of God. He belongs to God. By baptising him here in the church today you confirmed that you believe that. Show him and his brother, through your example what it means to belong to God, because people who belong to God, never gets lost in the mazes of life. And what else would you wish for your child, than knowing that he will always be safe and never get lost?!)

So – let's give to the government what is theirs, because we *have* to; and let's give to God what is his, because we *want* to. Because, after all, we are only citizens of Scotland, of the world, for a wee while, but we are citizens of the kingdom of God forever.

Amen