

**Show me the money**

*Psalm 96:1-9; Matthew 22:15-22*

In 1789 Benjamin Franklin, statesman, inventor and one of the founding fathers of the United States, wrote to a friend, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes."<sup>i</sup> Whether it is taxation, or the ongoing cost of living crisis caused by energy price hikes and food costs, we can expect to hear more promissory notes from politicians, usually without spelling out the detail of where the money is to come from, or what the success rate was for election pledges from the last time. We heard from the First Minister of the promise to freeze next year's council tax in Scotland without allegedly letting the civil service, or local authorities, know how the shortfall in civic income was going to be made up. The Prime Minister promised to build an innovative economy delivering more jobs and higher pay. The Leader of the Opposition promised to have a laser-like focus on growing the economy in every part of the country, with a mission-driven government taking long-term decisions and focussing on national renewal starting with cutting back waiting lists and reforming technical education to give people the skills needed for the future. Anyone would think there was a General Election next year!

Disputes about politics, the economy, taxation and fiscal priorities is nothing new. On the face of it Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees (a group who were devotees of the law of Moses and traditions of Judaism) and the Herodians (followers of King Herod who compromised with the Romans to retain power in Palestine) – the dispute was about taxation, and money; but it goes deeper. Palestine was a colony of the Roman Empire and the Jews were paying taxes that supported the army and government that occupied their country. Palestinian Jews were paying an Imperial tax to their oppressors to support their own oppression. Herodians supported the payment of tax as

it kept them in power. Pharisees opposed the tax because the coinage used to pay it had an image of 'the divine Caesar' which violated Jewish beliefs about graven images.

The ironic situation that united these warring factions was Jesus in the Temple. A trap is set for Him by His cynical opponents. The Pharisees hoped Jesus would say, "Pay the tax", and be accused of idolatry. The Herodians hoped Jesus would say, "Don't pay the tax", and be accused of treason. What Jesus says is, "Show me the money". On the coin Caesar's image was seen clearly. The denarius was a silver coin bearing on one side the image of the emperor, Tiberius, with an ascription ascribing divinity to him. One wonders what religious Jews were doing carrying idolatrous images in their pockets into the Temple in the first place. Then Jesus spoke these well-known words: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

It is Caesar's coin, give it back to Caesar. But what, if anything, are you giving back to God? It is a brilliant answer and confounds His enemies. It also speaks to *our* obligations and response to life today, cutting across the centuries.

We may not like the financial obligations we have to make to the state, direct and indirect. But what are the obligations, financial and otherwise, that we have to God and the Church?

Nobody likes sermons on money. They're challenging to preach, and they're equally challenging to hear. But that being the case so is everything relating to putting our faith into practise. Radical forgiveness. Radical hospitality. Radical volunteering. Radical giving. When women and men make commitments in faith, they promise before God to give a fitting portion of their time, their talents and their money to the work of God and God's Church. It is part of our ongoing responsibility to show our love for God, and our love for God's church. There have been some wonderful direct generous donations recently towards choral scholarships and the Wednesday Club. Week by week

people make donations to the Church flowers. On Sundays at the end of the month the amount of money raised by the Jam, Baking and Making Stall is incredible. There are other unseen but equally appreciated direct donations of time, talent and money weekly.

At this time in our Church's life, still recovering from the knock-on effects of lockdown, and the ongoing economic challenges our whole country faces, rising prices and inflation affect what we do in the Church too. There is a powerful attraction to give financial support directly to parts of the work our Church does. But in truth it is also vitally important that all members and friends of this congregation remember that ongoing giving for Church helps us to heat and light the building, pay our wonderful staff (without whom we could not function) and keep our work and our witness as a shining example of what is possible when people of goodwill set our congregation's work as a priority, and give generously. There will be a review of giving launched in a few weeks' time. I don't think the publicity strapline is going to be 'Show me the money!' – at least – I don't think it is! But our giving has slipped, and Jesus' reminder that we render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, comes as a timely reminder.

When it comes to how you handle your money, whether you can account for every hard-earned penny, or whether you know there is some opportunity for you to reassess what and how you commit your money (and your time and talents), what you choose to do really matters. As the saying goes, show me what you spend your money on, and I will tell you what you believe. The Kirk Session works hard to manage with good housekeeping across the board, but we know how much a healthy response to the review of giving will do not only to sustain our work but increase it in Church and community.

We look not only to ourselves and our own needs, but to the wider work of the Church, and to charities who face the world and interact with needs almost too desperate to contemplate.

The Church of Scotland has partners in charities and hospitals who are working in Israel-Palestine, and in Gaza, today. Tending the sick and dying, feeding the hungry, using skills to hold, heroically, what is left of the fabric of that ruined strip of land. I have seen it, and the difference it makes to young and old alike. Christianity is not the cult of the private. Christianity is called in these difficult times to speak truth to power in those troubled lands and in our own. Where selfishness, and violence, and greed, and the ruining of ecology need to be exposed. The faith communities are not the only voice, but we are one of them, and that is where our continuing presence shows our commitment to *giving* to God what is God's. Our standing steadfast with and helping where we can those who go hungry and helpless and homeless and voiceless.

What Jesus challenged His contemporaries, and believers today, is to consider is not whether or not we should render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Of course, we should pay our taxes. The bigger question is are we giving to God the things that are God's? How do we through our giving of time, talent and money, show that we put value on justice and mercy and kindness? The components of God's Kingdom to come, which we work towards today, because we crave those things now. Caesar's image was on the coin used to pay the Roman tax. God's image is on the faces of those who struggle *in* life and *with* life today. How do we show solidarity with them and support them practically? We already do in this Church, but a review about how we sustain this is due, and I pray that you will respond positively, generously, and faithfully when asked.

A rabbi, a priest, and a minister were discussing how they used the money in their collection plates. The rabbi said: "I draw a circle on the ground and throw the money in the air and whatever lands inside the circle I keep for myself and whatever lands outside I give to the Lord." The priest

said: "I have a similar process but when I draw my circle and throw my money, I keep whatever lands outside the circle and give what lands inside to the Lord." The minister said: " I throw the money in the air and whatever God catches He can keep!"

That's not quite how it should work!

This week, think on this: What am I rendering unto Caesar; and what am I giving to God.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Benjamin Franklin in letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy, November 1789