

Render unto Caesar

In the days leading up to his public execution, Jesus courageously preached in the Temple. Ceaselessly, the Pharisees and scribes would try and trip him up by asking him difficult questions; but each time, Jesus turns the tables on them (literally! but also figuratively too), responding to all their grilling with profound wisdom. In one of these instances, the Pharisees and Herodians – knowing full well that Roman soldiers are nearby – attempt to trick Jesus by asking him whether it's right for them to pay taxes to the Roman emperor (a pagan authority) or not.

You see, many of the wandering teachers and ascetics from the Judean desert and Galilee had anarchic and nationalistic sympathies, siding with the zealots and their fight for freedom against the Roman occupation. The Pharisees and Herodians seem to have mistakenly assumed Jesus was one such as these. If he'd said: 'No, we should certainly not pay taxes to the emperor' – he would have got into a lot of trouble. But then, if he'd said: 'Yes, of course we should pay them' – then the Jerusalem crowds may have become angry.

But Jesus was not an anarchist or a nationalist; he had no great regard for the authorities of his day, but he did not actively rebel against them either. His primary interest was God – *God's rule and authority* – and our acquiescence to

him. So, after showing the crowds the portrait of the emperor Tiberius on the coin, he brilliantly responds: *Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's!* It is so simple, powerful, and effective:

‘Never mind those tetrarchs and emperors, those tyrants who lord it over you; they’ll receive their judgement from God one day. What matters is where *you* stand with God here and now. Yes, obey them. But put God first.’ [*pause*]

Of course, there’s a difficulty to Jesus’s message here as well. Yes, the eternal kingdom of God and his authority over all things is paramount – but surely the here and now, the justice and harmony in our earthly society is important too. Jesus certainly believed this. So, is he suggesting that if we are ruled by a tyrant (and Tiberius certainly was an astonishingly ruthless and depraved individual), are we simply to accept and consent to that tyrant’s rule? To roll over and submit? Even when we see injustice, corruption, and oppression...?

The debate between Jesus and the Pharisees over taxes is one that stayed vivid in the minds of the early Christians and the apostolic writers; there are echoes of it later in the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans, while persuading the Christians in Rome of their duty to pay their taxes, Paul writes: *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for ... those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has*

appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. So, not only are we to comply to those in power – but we are to regard them as having been *put into* those positions of power by God.

Claudius had been emperor when Romans was written (a man almost as shady as his uncle Tiberius) and yet Paul tells the Church in Rome: *if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.* Claudius, God's servant?

Likewise, in his renowned letter, the Apostle Peter writes: *For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right ... Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.*

Nero was emperor when Peter wrote this. Nero was a mentally disturbed and extremely violent megalomaniac, arguably more wicked than all the Roman emperors before and after him. And yet, early Christians were expected to honour him because he had (apparently) been put there by God. [pause]

This should give us cause for discomfort. Are Paul and Peter even interpreting correctly what Jesus was saying with regards to taxes and authority? Or have they taken Jesus's implications a little too far?

What about Stalin, or Chairman Mao, or Pol Pot, or Saddam Hussein? Are we to honour and accept the authority of men like that? Is that seriously what Jesus would have wanted? A lot of people think that the reason Christians in Nazi Germany failed so catastrophically in taking a stand against fascism was because of a historic tendency amongst German Lutherans to submit to authoritarian rule – be that the Habsburg Emperor, the Kaiser, or the Fuhrer. It's simply not good enough.

Going back to Jesus's courage in the Temple... Here was a man unafraid of speaking truth to power, calling out authorities in their corruption, criticising religious leaders for their hypocrisy. He called Herod a fox. He told religious leaders they had throats like open graves. He denounced the Gentile tyrants who 'lord it over' their subjects. Feel free to disagree, but this does not sound like the total subordination that Peter and Paul were (perhaps) advocating.

Jesus ushered in God's peaceful and just kingdom of love and equality. This was partially done by his demonstration that to be a ruler is to be a servant – and to be great is to be the least. God's rule and authority shows itself through self-emptying love and humility. The rulers and tyrants of this world justify theirs by shows of strength and success, *or* through corruption and violence. But Jesus shows his kingship in the wisdom of his words to the Pharisees, and in his obedience to death on a cross.

He demonstrates a form of kingship that goes against everything this world knows: showing that a king who has to justify his authority, is no king at all.

So, yes, Jesus does teach us to 'render unto Caesar'. He does not desire us to be lawbreaking anarchists or revolutionary Bolsheviks. Good governance and the rule of law are important for a just and harmonious society. But how far can we allow obedience to authority to stretch, if that authority is becoming increasingly ungodly and unjust? I'm not going to name the equivalents of Tiberius, Claudius and Nero at large in the world today. You watch the news.

How many of you believe God deliberately put these tyrants into power, and that it's God's will for us to submit to them? I struggle with it a lot. I get very uncomfortable at how readily Peter and Paul tried to convince their churches to submit to such evil rulers. Maybe they were just trying to protect Christians from persecution, convincing them of their need not to provoke authorities. So many verses in the New Testament are open to scrutiny and interpretation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor who lived in Nazi Germany, appalled at the German Protestant acceptance of Hitler, was an early outspoken critic of Nazism. He readily preached and wrote that anyone who obsequiously offered themselves to the rule of a tyrant was guilty of idolatry. Rulers who

set themselves up as a gods can't be followed. Bonhoeffer defied the Gestapo and refused to recant his faith 'openly admitting that, as a Christian, he was an implacable enemy of National Socialism and its totalitarian demands [on] the citizen' (Leibholz, xxiii). Christ is the King. [*pause*]

I realise I've given you an awful lot to think about. But this is for people who sincerely care about the direction the world is headed, for people who don't just turn off the news and close their eyes to what is happening everywhere. More and more nations each year are falling into nationalism, dictatorship, and oppression. We *must* pray about this. As followers of Christ, we want to abide by just laws and pay our taxes, but we also need to be prepared for what we will do if (heaven forbid) we ever find ourselves under bad governance, a tyrant. Let us hold silence for all our sisters and brothers in the world who are facing this now... [*long pause*] Amen.