

# 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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“Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Those who question Our Lord put their finger on a real issue that goes much deeper than simply the payment of taxes. What are the limits to the demands civil society can make? We have first to ask, “What is due to God?” We owe God the response of love in appreciation for his love towards us. He has given us life, and all that we are and have. The first great commandment is to love God. The second is to love our neighbour. There cannot be a true conflict between these, but there can be an apparent conflict if our neighbour, or in this context, civil society, demand of us something that is contrary to the Commandments, or the way of life that Christ came to teach us.

At some periods of history the issue is sharper than others. When society is governed by or at least influenced by Christian values the conflicts tend to be small and focussed. At other times the whole value system is hostile to the Christian way of life and society lays claim to total allegiance in every area of life. Dictatorial regimes are not always totalitarian, but even democratic systems can develop totalitarian tendencies and can become dictatorial. An example of this is political correctness over gender. Canada has a socially liberal government but legally recognises 31 varieties of ‘gender description’ and failure to recognise these or use what is considered the appropriate form of address can open the way to prosecution!

As a community and as individuals we receive benefits from civil government that we often take for granted, and miss only when they break down, whether protection from invaders, or law and order, the social services, or street lighting. This puts upon us a legal, moral and religious duty to contribute to the common good, whether financially or in other ways, such as jury service. We might have legitimate arguments over the use of taxation, or how it is applied, but this does not relieve us of our civil responsibilities. We should find other ways to bring about change. Failure to contribute our share to the common good is just as much theft as breaking into our neighbour’s house, even if the effect on individual taxpayers is invisible in the great scheme of things.

In the Jewish and Christian understanding although civil rulers may be chosen in many different ways – and sometimes impose themselves by naked force - their authority comes from God. Jesus says to Pilate, “You would have no authority over me if God had not given it you”. It is given them not for their personal pleasure and advantage, but for the common good. This is why Isaiah can call the pagan King Cyrus ‘The Lord’s anointed’. This is why St Paul tells us to pray for our rulers. This is why Our Lord tells his questioners to give Caesar his due even though the Emperor Tiberius was a poor ruler who by this time spent most of his time in debauchery on the island of Capri and thought nothing of having his enemies killed. Ultimately rulers must answer God for how they use their authority. Everything we are and have comes from God. Nothing is outside his Kingship, and so, in some sense, everything is due to God. For three hundred years the Roman authorities persecuted Christianity but this did not mean that the Christian community were freed from their obligations to civil society in all things that were not sinful.

Today the challenges are more subtle – the attempts to relegate Christianity to the private sphere and exclude any influence on society at large. A particular example is the whole area of medical ethics, abortion and euthanasia. None of these things are simply a matter of personal belief. They involve the values underpinning society. They involve the protection given to the most vulnerable in society. To weigh things in terms of cost-effectiveness, or the contribution the vulnerable can make or their quality of life as perceived by others strikes at the heart of the unique value given to every human being by our Creator. Can politicians put aside their beliefs and values because they are not shared by their party as a whole or the majority of their electors? Can we ignore these issues when we have a vote to cast? Is it right to remain silent out of respect for those who disagree with us? What do we owe Caesar? What do we owe God? St Thomas More sought to avoid open conflict with Henry VIII over his actions in declaring himself Head of the Church, but in the end he had to make a stand. “I am the King’s good servant, but God’s first. We do not serve the common good by giving to Caesar what belongs to God.