

**29th Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
**Fr Jonathan Jong**

**Readings**

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Matthew 22:15-21

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Money is, by functional definition, a unit of account, a store of value, and a medium of exchange.

As such, money allows commerce to develop beyond bartering. Instead of giving you four pints of *essential Waitrose semi-skimmed milk (1.7% fat)* for your six *essential Waitrose British free range eggs (mixed weight)*, I can give you a twelve-sided bit of nickel and brass worth £1. You can then take the coin and save it for much longer than the milk would last, or use it for an investment or to buy six *essential Waitrose shortcrust mince pies*, also priced at £1, which you might prefer.

One *pound*. Reminiscent of how, once upon an Anglo-Saxon time, the pound referred to a weight of silver, split into 240 pennies. Not so anymore, of course: the metals in the coin are worth somewhere in the neighbourhood of 5p; and you can no longer trade your coins and banknotes to the government in exchange for gold. Since 1971, our money only has value by fiat and faith.

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*Who is that face on the coin?* he asks.

*Elizabeth II, dei gratia regina, fidei defensor,* we reply.

Fidei defensor. Times sure have changed. All the same: render unto Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs what is Her Majesty's, and to God what is God's. Now, here's hoping we can tell the difference.

Of course, we should pay our taxes. Unless, you know, the modern nation-state is inherently violent, inextricably enmeshed as it is in cycles of economic injustice and the unholy dalliance between the military-industrial complex and a foreign policy of mutually-assured destruction. I mean, if that were the

case, our taxes would be a subsidy on slavery disguised as trade, warmongering disguised as national security.

And yet, and yet, our taxes also fund public services, which include provisions for the most vulnerable among us: the sick, the poor, the homeless, the imprisoned; them, the primary audience of the gospel of Jesus Christ, first citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

There's the rub. God and Caesar. Church and State. Christ and Culture. If we have to choose, we have already lost. If we are caught trafficking in the image of imperial power—stamped into the fictions that line our pockets, with which we seek to buy our food and freedom both—we have already lost. We are already lost, already mistaken about who we are, in the world but not of it; a city on a hill, but not, mind you, because we are above the fray; indeed, we are salt, to be consumed, and bread and wine too.

The coin is the sign of our complicity. Perhaps this is why it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, he who is weighed down by the image of his god and king. Perhaps it is why Jesus keeps telling people to give

everything up to feed and clothe the poor, and why he tosses that bit of shrapnel back to his interlocutors with a flippant comment about Caesar's face. Tiberius can keep his blood money, and good luck to us if we are seeking money that's not.

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Retreat or revolution: these often seem to be the only options for achieving innocence again, gaining a second naïveté from our societal sins. We could take the so-called "Benedict Option", named for that great pioneer of Western monasticism, and live together in Christian enclaves, distant and disengaged from the rest of the corrupt and corrupting world. But even Benedictines, even the Amish and the Bruderhof participate in modern capitalism. No alternative Christian communities have entirely been able to escape from entanglement with money and power, though I have recently discovered to my amusement that there are a few Christian cryptocurrencies, electronic monetary systems that are decentralised and therefore autonomous from any nation-state. Bitcoin for Bible believers, if you like.

If retreat can never be complete, perhaps revolution is preferable: the overthrowing of Caesar to reinstate Christ unto his throne. Or, at least, Christ's representatives, who just happen to be us. But we have seen this before; with Christendom came crusade and colonialism, neither of which bear repetition.

Established religion of the more familiar variety is perhaps a lesser evil, but—let's be honest—it is also rather toothless. It has been a long time since the established Church's moral vision has been anything but vague, anodyne, and ignored, or worse: mocked for its closed-minded and casual cruelty.

It should be telling that neither retreat nor revolution were the way that Jesus trod, though, of course, that way of sorrow ends in giving up much more than the conveniences of online shopping at Waitrose. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that Jesus did both, in his peculiar in-but-not-of-the-world sort of way.

People quit their jobs to follow him. Peter and Andrew, James and John left their trawlers behind; and Levi his desk at HMRC. But far from retreating, they went *into* towns and villages to bring good news to them, bringing to them healing of diverse kinds. And even for this Jesus tells them, a few chapters ago in St

Matthew's gospel, to give without pay for they received without pay, though they may accept food offered.

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I know as well as you do that there is no returning now to the apostolic era, when the early Christians probably thought that the world's end was imminent, despite having neither climate change nor North Korea to worry about. No matter, whether for surplus of sensibility or deficit of faith, we are not checking out of the status quo, and there is no sense pretending that we will, one hypocrite to his friends.

But if the gospel we have been entrusted to proclaim, no less than the early disciples were, is to be a gospel not only in word but also in power and with the Holy Spirit, then we need to find our version of flipping back that tribute penny in repudiation of whatever ersatz peace and justice is currently on offer, *Pax Britannica* bought with blood and bigotry.

On its face, "Render unto Caesar" sounds nothing like civil disobedience, but that is what it is, no less than is the refusal to defend oneself in Pilate's kangaroo court. In both cases, Jesus rejects the premise of the choice

altogether: to pay taxes to Caesar or not, to answer Pilate's charge or not, neither can be right in a world of Caesars and Pilates? *Nothing* can be right in such a world, which is why we need saving, need the absolute disruption of the Cross and Resurrection. Only this way can saints be made of sinners, can saints be made at all. To be sure, we are complicit in this world of our own making, but we are also caught up in this thing God has done. This thing God is doing, even through us, called and surnamed and girded and grasped by our right hands, to be more than the structures we inhabit would lull us to be.

One thinks of all the times, by the grace of God, our sisters and brothers have seen through the counterfeit goods foisted upon us, and decided to act. One thinks of the march from Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma to Montgomery, with Reverend King joined by people of all colours and creeds, some in collar or habit, rosaries fastened to their waists. They knew that "separate but equal" is false justice. One thinks of the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s, when Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, AZ and over 500 churches across the United States illegally harboured refugees from Central America. "Border security" is false security. One thinks of the Plowshares

Movement, begun by a Jesuit priest with his friends, who broke into a military facility to vandalise nuclear weapons in protest. “Peace through strength” is false peace and false strength.

In certain times and in certain places, we have remembered our identities and integrity: the Body of Christ broken, his blood spilt, for the sake of the world. The need for such remembering has never waned, and is as great as it ever was. May it therefore happen more, and here, and to us, to you and even me.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**