

## **“Christian taxpayers”**

### **Sermon - Gregor Henderson**

**Canberra Central Uniting Parish, 16 October 2011**

#### **Psalm 99, Matthew 22:15-22**

Few of us are keen on paying taxes. Taxes are often regarded, at best, as a necessary evil.

We could modernise today's gospel reading about paying taxes to the emperor by changing the Pharisees' question to "Is it right that we should support the new carbon tax?". And in our imagination, while knowing that just about every Christian church in the world supports action on climate change, we could perhaps hear Jesus giving a typically thoughtful and rather enigmatic reply, something like "Render to the earth that which belongs to the earth and to God that which belongs to God".

The Pharisees, of course, are trying to set up Jesus with their carefully crafted approach to him. They butter him up with false praise. And they ask him a question where a yes would put Jesus offside with one bunch of people (those who oppose the Romans), and a no have him offside with another bunch of people (those who collaborate with or depend upon the Romans). It's very clever. But Jesus is aware of their malice and responds with what might be called "two bob each way" – "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's".

Sometimes Jesus' reply is used, wrongly, to argue for a complete separation between religion and government, between church and state, between faith and politics. The emperor's things, the business of government, is to be left to the emperor and his governors, some will argue. God's things are different, apart, religion is a private matter, about prayer and worship and heaven and eternity, not about the things of government and politics.

Yet the Scriptures teach us that God is God of everything, of the whole of creation, that what belongs to the emperor ultimately belongs to God, that everything we have and are comes ultimately from God and we are but temporary stewards of God's gifts. And Jesus calls his followers to be involved in the whole of life. The very fact of the question about taxes and the emperor being raised with Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians - both groups much involved in political life – shows that Jesus' fresh teaching about God and God's way was seen as having political implications.

As Christians we are in fact called by God to be involved in the world, to care about what happens in the world, to be contributors to the wellbeing of others, to be workers for justice and peace. Jesus doesn't give us chapter and verse about exactly how we live out our involvement in the world in every situation, for God had gifted us with intelligence, understanding and talents to work out the details for ourselves. Yet from Jesus' teaching and ministry we learn there are vital guidelines or principles which we can apply to our life as citizens, to our social and political lives. Let me outline just 5 of those principles or guidelines with you now.

**One** vital guideline or principle for us Christians is to take a world view. God is God of the whole world, of every person. We are to approach matters of government therefore from a wide inclusive viewpoint. The symbols of our faith are symbols for the whole world – the cross, the alpha and omega, the Bible. There is no Australian flag in this church, there is no racism in this church, there is no classism in God's church. God is God of all, we are citizens of the whole world.

A **second** principle flows from that. We are to live as citizens with respect and care for all, to seek the common good. So when we consider what we are to think or feel about some development in society or some specific piece of legislation, our first question is not how will this affect me, what will it do to my hip-pocket – but rather does this development or this new legislation serve the common good.

A **third** Christian principle takes us a bit beyond the common good. It is Jesus' principle of caring particularly for the poor, the oppressed, the outcast. As citizens who are Christians God asks us particularly to preference the needs of the most needy among us. Compassion, unselfishness, service, even sacrifice, are the values God asks of us towards those in need. So the church has always been involved in welfare work, in hospital care, in educational services. As we respond to developments in our society and to parliamentary legislation one question we are called to ask is how does this assist those most in need.

**Fourthly**, as Christian citizens we are called always to point to the good news of Jesus Christ, to bear witness to the love of God for all and the interest God has in every aspect of life. We're not to try and impose our views on others, nor to impose God on those who do not believe. The soapbox on the street-corner and the threats of eternal damnation belong to a past era, but nevertheless God asks of us that we be witnesses to his love and to his desire for people to live with respect, with care, with compassion, in relationship with God. We are to be agents of Jesus Christ, pointing people to know and receive God's gifts of abundant and eternal life, and praying every day for God's will to prevail.

And a **fifth** principle is the reminder that God is in ultimate control. Did you hear the opening verses of Psalm 99 today? "The Lord is king, let the earth tremble". Our world needs a sense of awe, of wonder, to realise that God is behind this vast creation, that God's purpose is good, and that God is the one in ultimate control of life in God's universe. The occasional reminder from us Christian citizens to our politicians that their power is in fact limited and temporary is no bad thing.

Five principles – a world view, the common good, special care for those in need, witnessing to the gospel, God as lord of all – lie behind our political and social participation in the world. We could perhaps add a sixth - paying our taxes without complaint. For Jesus did not advocate withholding taxes, not even from the largely hated Roman conquerors.

So we are to render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's, noting that Jesus knew very well that everything ultimately comes from God and belongs to God. As followers of Jesus, we are to participate in matters of government and politics, and to do so knowing that God is present in every aspect of life and seeking to bring the values of Jesus to every aspect of life.

To the glory of God. Amen.