

DATE: Sunday October 31

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington

BIBLE PASSAGE: Mark 12:13-17

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: Paying Taxes ... Rendering to Caesar.

the things that are Caesar's. We don't like paying taxes and GST and other duties, but they are the way that those in power receive the income they need to provide the services
INTRODUCTION:- What do you expect or hope-for from a sermon? As the preacher moves to the pulpit, do you say brightly, "Here we go again"? Or do you say despondently, "Here we go again"?

So – your expectations and hopes – maybe to learn a new insight into well-known verse of Bible passage ... maybe to be challenged ... maybe to be comforted ... maybe to be entertained ... maybe to agree with what will be said.

As a sermon preacher, my hopes are that the congregation members won't be bored ... may learn something new ... may be inspired to live a little differently.

But what if you don't agree with something in the sermon? I think that sermons ... speeches ... books that I don't agree with are really helpful. They force me to work out WHY I don't agree, and in that way, they help me to understand my own convictions.

Last Wednesday when I preached this same sermon, I was left in no doubt that not everyone agreed with what I said. That's good, and that's healthy, and that showed that people listened, analysed ... and some disagreed.

What are your hopes and expectations about the sermon you're about to hear?

There are 2 kinds of sermon-hearers. There are those who come to the end of the sermon greatly helped - and those who come to the end of the sermon greatly refreshed. I hope you will be in the first category.

Just one other thought - a chap named Archibald McLeish said, "Religion is at its best when it makes us ask hard questions of ourselves. Religion is at its worst when it deludes itself into thinking we have the answers for everybody else."

And so here we go with today's sermon.

BACKGROUND:- Pecking order – it's an important feature in some people's lives, and in many organisation's lives. Who has the right to go first? Who has the right to have first taste? Which child has the right to sit in the front seat of the car?

In our Gospel reading today we have a glimpse into some first century "pecking order" – among the groups who were trying to get Jesus tripped up and tripped over and in trouble. So let's begin by sorting out these groups. Pharisees ... Sadducees ... Scribes ... Herodians. Who were they, what were the differences, who pecked first?

In our gospel reading today we've got Herodians , Pharisees and Herodians.

Pharisees ... they were a bunch of experts in the Jewish religion – and in a rather important part of it. The Jews had the law, the Torah, written and given to Moses. But the Jews also had an oral tradition ... if you like, it was the explanation of the law, and a tradition that covered all the nitty-gritties that the written law didn't cover. To be rather rude about them, the Pharisees were not only nitty-gritters, they were also nitty-pickers. Who was pure enough to go into the temple and pure enough to satisfy God? Ask the Pharisees ... they knew. They had the oral tradition. And because they knew, they imposed their interpretation of the law onto ordinary Jewish people. "You follow the law in **THIS** way" they said. So the Pharisees were influential and powerful over the people. They believed in a resurrection life. They thought that they pecked first.

Sadducees – another bunch of experts in the Jewish religion – but in a *different* important part of it. The Jews had the law, the Torah, written and given to Moses. The Sadducees were real experts in this written Law. Blow the oral tradition that the Pharisees emphasised. It was the written law that was important said the Sadducees. They pored over the scrolls of the Law, and knew every comma, every semi colon, every word. And, they controlled the worship at the temple. If the Pharisees could tell you who was pure enough to go into the temple, the Sadducees could tell you what to do once you were in the temple. It's as though the Pharisees were on the outside of the temple checking your credentials for going in, and the Sadducees were on the inside of the temple checking what you did in there to make sure it complied with the written law. They were the powerful elite of first century Judaism, and they held great political influence with the Roman Empire that ruled over Judaea. The Romans were far more impressed with the Sadducees than they were with the Pharisees. The Romans thought that the Sadducees pecked first. There was a major belief difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees ... the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection life. As my father used to say, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, that is why that were sad, you see.

Pharisees – religious – oral tradition – nit pickers. Sadducees – religious – written law – influence with Romans. OK so far?

Scribes – a third bunch ... not a specifically *religious* bunch of experts, but they knew what the written law said, because one of their jobs was to write out the written law when another copy was needed. They knew the written law almost as well as the Sadducees did, and they knew what it meant and how it applied to life. The scribes were also employed in writing other sorts of documents - contracts, secular documents, invoices, letters, reports, etc. They pecked third in line.

Herodians - the fourth bunch. They weren't religious at all. They were political. The Herodians derived their name as followers of King Herod. The Herodians were a political party that that supported King Herod Antipas, the Roman Empire's ruler over much of the land of the Jews from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. Herodians wanted to restore a Herod to the throne in Judea, as well as in other areas ruled by Herod the Great , rather than have the Romans on the throne. They were political foes of the Pharisees who wished to restore the kingdom of David. The Herodians held political power, and their support of Herod got them offside with the Pharisees who saw that it compromised Jewish independence. It was difficult for the Herodians and Pharisees to unite and agree on anything. But one thing did unite them—

opposing Jesus. Herod himself wanted Jesus dead (Luke 13:31), and the Pharisees had already hatched plots against Him (John 11:53), so the Herodians and the Pharisees joined efforts to achieve their common goal.

The Herodians pecked in a completely different chook yard to the Sadducees, Pharisees and the scribes.

And so came another loaded question to Jesus from the Herodians and the Pharisees – is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? If Jesus said, ‘Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,’ out the window went his influence and appeal to the Jewish people. They’d see him as a traitor. But if Jesus said, ‘No, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,’ he could be arrested for sedition and revolution. They had Jesus no matter what he said. A trap without an escape. Clever question!

Clever answer! “Render to Caesar the things that belong to Cesar, and render to God the things that belong to God.”

Jesus’ followers then and now belong in two worlds, the kingdom of God’s power and the kingdom of human power. We can’t withdraw from the kingdom of human power – the state – and live 100% as civic-non-contribution citizens because we’re all wrapped up in God’s kingdom. We need agencies that the state provides – health service, road maintenance, schools. We can’t withdraw from the kingdom of God’s power and live 100% in the kingdom of human power. As Christians we need the fellowship and the worship and the symbols and the actions of Christian life and witness.

What is our Christian attitude to the state – and how do we render unto Caesar (the government) the things that belong to Caesar (the government?)

St Paul in Romans 13 reminds us that the state is ordained by God. From a Christian perspective, the state is the visible expression of God’s rulership over the world. Because as Christians we believe that God’s rulership is in the hands of the people we elect, we are therefore glad to obey the laws they pass. Without the laws of the state life would be chaos. It’s in this way that we “render unto Caesar they provide for us. We can’t honourably receive all the benefits that living in a state confer upon us, and then opt out of all the responsibilities of citizenship. Paying taxes are “rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”

Jesus and St Paul both indicate that Christians have a responsibility to respect the state – especially one such as in Australia and in South Australia that is a democracy and whose federal and state parliaments begin every day’s proceedings with a prayer for God’s blessing and with the Lord’s Prayer. We may not agree with everything our government does, and we do have a right to make our different opinion known and our voice heard in peaceful and sensible protest, in petitions, in speeches and at the ballot box. Remember Martin Luther King Jr and his speeches against the American government policy of racial discrimination. But on the whole our Christian duty is to respect those who exercise God’s rulership, to pray for them, to let them know when we think they are doing a good job, and to let them know when we think they are not doing a good job.

Jesus and St Paul did not live in a democratic government – far from it – and yet they encourage us to respect the government. In all ordinary circumstances, our Christianity should make us better citizens. As responsible, thinking, careful and concerned citizens who happen to be Christians, let us render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's.