

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's

Let me re-introduce you to three of the most powerful words in the world. Now, I know what you're thinking, and while "I love you" *are* three great words, they're not the ones I'm thinking about this time. Instead try, "I don't know." Surprised? Let me explain.

I suspect that saying "I don't know" seems like an admission of failure to many in our culture, especially in a city like Cambridge which contains one of the most prestigious universities in the world and a lot of very clever people. But I'd like to offer another slant, as I think that telling another person "I don't know" offers an invitation for them to share what *they* know or, sometimes even better, to join you in *together* figuring something out. This becomes especially true when you pair those three words with four others: "What do *you* think?"

Seen in this way, this combination - "I don't know. What do you think?" - can be incredibly empowering. Next time a child asks you a question, try it out. You might be surprised at how much he or she knows and has to say about the subject matter in question, none of which you'd have heard if you'd just given a quick answer. I tried this last Sunday when, over lunch, my 6 yr old grand-

daughter asked why I was the only person around the table (and in our family) with blue eyes. My answer '*I don't know Eden. What do you think?*' created a rich conversation about genetics and diversity that we may not have had if I'd given a simple and quick child appropriate reply and then moved swiftly on. Sometimes, slowing down and empowering others to think for themselves and, together, figuring it out, leads to a better outcome.

If you're willing, I'd suggest that this week's gospel reading from Matthew offers an excellent opportunity to do just that. You know the scene: the Pharisees are once again trying to trap Jesus, this time by asking a politically loaded question: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not." And Jesus once again foils their plans, this time by replying, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Fabulous answer, don't you think? Except what, exactly, does it mean?

I don't know. What do you think?

Most biblical scholars agree on two interpretive elements of this passage. First, our modern separation of church and state - which this text is often used to support - is just that, *modern*. It's highly unlikely that a devout Jew of the first century would imagine the clean separation of our

lives into political and religious spheres that we are used to. Second, the coin produced likely had not only the likeness (*icon*) of Caesar but also the title "Son of God." Which means that possessing it was tantamount to idolatry and a violation of the first two commandments - you shall have no other Gods before me, and you shall make no idols.

So is Jesus saying that we owe nothing to a false God like Caesar and should reserve all things for God? I don't know. What do you think? Or is he inviting us to recognise that while we may, in fact, owe the emperors of this world some things - like taxes - we owe God *other* things - like our whole selves? I don't know. What do you think? Or is Jesus instead inviting us to avoid giving our allegiance to the material and secular things of this world that our coins can buy and demanding our ultimate devotion is directed to God? Again, I don't know. What do you think?

This isn't just a clever exercise. I really *don't* know. And I really *am* interested in what you think. I have a hunch - and it's really just that - that Jesus isn't advocating a full-scale retreat from the economic and political dimensions of our lives but instead is helping us to recognise that all of these things are part of God's divine economy. That is, I think Jesus invites us - actually, demands of us - that we

be thinking regularly and relentlessly about how all of our decisions - what we buy, who we vote for, how we spend our time - should be shaped by the confession that, indeed, the whole world is God's and everything in it - including us!

But what does that mean? Or, more to the point, how should our faith actually shape our daily decisions, particularly our economic ones? As it turns out, this can be incredibly tricky business, and it's something that I know many Christians think about a lot. For some it's a question of how much to spend on themselves or give away, while for others it's a desire to pass on their values about money to their kids. But it's not something we talk about in church very much, which is surprising given that Jesus talked about money in 11 of the 39 parables, and in one out of every seven verses of dialogue attributed to him. It seems like the only time we talk about money in church is when we're asking people to give some to the church. A very important request, but not the whole picture.

But what if, this Sunday, we reversed that trend and impression by wrestling together with what Jesus says by asking ourselves, "What do *we* think Jesus means? What things are Caesar's and what are God's? How does our faith shape our economic decisions - our buying, our

saving, our giving, and the rest?” It would be interesting to know what you think.

So, can I encourage you to re-read today’s passage when you get home, maybe read it with family members or friends and ask yourselves “What does this mean for us?’ How *do* we decide what to buy, how much we give away, how much we save and where we put our money?” And, if we believe that the whole world is God’s and everything in it, are we getting those decisions right? I don’t know. What do you think?

Let’s pray:

Heavenly Father, as we seek to make important connections between faith and daily life, help us over this next week to think deeply about this passage and what it means for each of us here today. We thank you for the example of Jesus that, in being presented with a question, he replied with another, giving his hearers the opportunity to work things out for themselves. We pray for wisdom and discernment as we wrestle with these important issues. In Jesus’ name, Amen.