



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Giving to Caesar is a duty, giving to God a joy

Readings: Isaiah 45: 1-, 4-6, Ps 95, 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5, Matthew 22: 15-21

In the autumn of 1973 I was in Upper New York State in the home of a venerable Republican Presbyterian widow, Annabel Paton. She, like all the supporters of the soon to be disgraced President, had had a pretty torrid time as the scandal of the Watergate burglary began to unfold. Nonetheless she was hanging on in there, as the Americans say.

Adding to the rising tide of political sewage was the resignation of the Vice President, Spiro Agnew (remember him?) for fiddling his taxes. The spotlight then turned on Nixon himself. He should release his tax returns – a necessary courtesy that all subsequent presidents have conformed except the Donald. Nixon refused. Not for long it is true. He insisted he had earned every penny and that he was not a crook.

My ancient hostess was reading the paper that morning. She didn't even look up at me from the news.

'That's it', she declared, 'He's gone'.

What, I asked perplexed, was the tipping point?

‘We Americans can put up with a lot but we have to pay our taxes. If the President isn’t squeaky clean on this one, trust me, HE IS GONE.’

In the event Nixon’s taxes weren’t crooked. He paid hardly any and had stretched every loophole to breaking point but they weren’t criminal.

Too Late. Perception was now the ringmaster of his fate.

My dear old friend, Annabel, was right. He was gone.

The fact is that ordinary people don’t enjoy paying taxes but they accept that such payment is an integral part of their contract with the state and, in a democratic state, there is at least the possibility of some say in the matter.

Defence of the Realm, Education of the young, Care of the Sick, Salvation of the Poor –amongst other things – are corporate concerns for which we, as subjects of the Crown and citizens of the State, bear a collective responsibility.

It is why we get hot under the collar when dodgy dealers take their knighthoods and their ill-gotten gains to financially sunnier climes or great corporates drop a farthing in the plate while pretending to operate out of an offshore island (I may not have spelt that correctly).

It has always been a touchy subject and never more so than in the time of Jesus. The taxes went to a foreign, occupying power. They were collected by private enterprise tax-farmers who added their own stiff mark up. The taxed had no say in the matter. So Jesus is being asked a profoundly political question here? If He denies the authority of Caesar then He is guilty of

sedition. If He affirms the authority of the Empire then He is clearly not the Messiah for whom they have been waiting. Cleft stick time.

His answer is a masterclass in straight talking and brilliant ambiguity. The state has its purposes.....and its limitations. The believer has his obligation to the state, his corporate responsibility, his loyalty to the institution that prevents sheer anarchy. But he also has an obligation to God. No-one need ask the subsequent obvious question, which is greater? For the Roman state divinity had become co-terminous with the imperial power, emperors were part of the pantheon. For a Jew such an absurd arrogance was an obscenity.

A Christian, therefore, is never an anti-nomian, a man of lawlessness for its own sake. He has his obligations to the state. He may object to facets of that state or its economic polity. In civil terms I abhor the abortion law. In economic terms I find it punitive that people must pay half a year's wages to the government in Stamp Duty for moving house.

But I pay my taxes, vote when I can and write to my political representatives regularly and thank God that I have the liberty and wherewithal to do it.

What I pay to God is a matter of much deeper order. I owe him everything.

As Augustine says: 'What do you have that you were not given?'

In economic terms I have always found it a good discipline to tithe my disposable income. That is both Biblical and fruitful. We are necessarily generous to Caesar, we should be voluntarily generous to God.

On the face of every coin of the realm is a portrait of the monarch and a series of letters. They are an acronym for 'QUEEN, By the Grace of God, Defender of the Faith'. We know that the last bit, Defender of the Faith, a conceit of the great persecutor of the Church, Henry VIII, is a nonsense. However lovely and dutiful our present sovereign may be she is incapable of stopping even the most ungodly legislation without provoking a constitutional crisis and ending the monarchy.

The only Defender of the Faith in this country is the Catholic Church, you and me. Our faithful, loving, wholehearted support of the Church is the only bulwark against materialistic hubris and predictable tyranny. We have no church tax BUT we have a duty to be as sacrificial as we can in our giving.

We have no inspectors who will fine us for not being at Mass, not saying our prayers, not supporting the persecuted church, not reading our Bible, not caring for the poor, not evangelising the parish, not loving Jesus with all our hearts. What we do have is a Lord who has given us everything.

He understands our human predicament and polity – render unto Caesar.

But to God? What would we not want to give Him?

Caesar is a duty. God is a joy.

Caesar is for a passing moment of our mortality.

God is the true investment of ourselves in eternity.