

Sunday 18 October 2026
Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 45.1–7
NT: 1 Thessalonians 1.1–10
Gp: Matthew 22.15–22

Public life rests upon a simple but demanding truth: citizenship brings both rights and responsibilities. We share in the benefits of society, and we are also called to contribute to its common good. Few obligations express that tension more plainly than taxation—a duty so familiar and unavoidable that Benjamin Franklin famously placed it alongside life’s only other certainty: “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

So wrote Benjamin Franklin one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. He was a drafter and signer of the Declaration of Independence, in a letter he wrote to Jean-Baptiste Leroy in November 1789, just a few months before his death, reflecting on the newly finalized United States Constitution. Franklin’s observation presents death and taxes as life’s certainties; Paul, however, directs us towards the enduring Christian virtues of faith, love and hope. Yet taxes are never merely an abstract certainty: they reveal how political authority reaches into ordinary lives, a reality captured sharply in an old account concerning Louis XIV.

Even in severe cold, Louis XIV is said to have declined to wear gloves while hunting. On one winter’s day, two peasants observed him riding past. “His hands must be freezing,” remarked the first. “Why should they be?” replied the second. “He always has his hands in our pockets.” The story turns Franklin’s general observation into a pointed image of the burden of taxation and the mistrust that earthly power can inspire; Isaiah, however, directs us beyond the claims of rulers to the sovereignty of God, before whom every authority is limited and accountable. Before the Gospel confronts us with the claims of Caesar, Isaiah directs our attention to the sovereignty of God. The prophet speaks of Cyrus, the Persian ruler whom God calls “his anointed”, although Cyrus neither belongs to Israel nor acknowledges Israel’s God. The passage therefore makes a striking claim: divine purpose is not confined by the boundaries of nation, religion or empire. Earthly rulers may exercise genuine power, but their authority is neither absolute nor independent of the God who declares, “I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

This theme bears directly upon the question later put to Jesus. Caesar may claim loyalty, revenue and honour, yet Caesar does not possess the whole of human life. Isaiah places every political claim beneath the prior sovereignty of God, who can work even through rulers who do not recognise the divine purpose they serve.

Paul’s opening words to the Thessalonians show us what faithful allegiance to God looks like within ordinary human society. He gives thanks for their “work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope”. Their reception of the Gospel has not remained a private conviction; it has become visible in conduct, endurance and service. Having “turned to God from idols”, they offer a public witness to a different order of loyalty.

Isaiah and Paul therefore prepare us to hear Matthew’s Gospel with greater clarity. Isaiah places every ruler beneath the sovereignty of God; Paul shows that allegiance to this sovereign God must become visible in faithful conduct. Matthew now brings these convictions into direct confrontation with political power. When Jesus is asked whether taxes should be paid to

Caesar, the question concerns far more than money: it tests the extent of Caesar's authority, the nature of obedience, and the ultimate claim of God upon human life.

When the narrative reaches Matthew 22, Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has cleansed the temple, confronted corruption and revealed the spiritual bankruptcy of the religious establishment. His actions have consequently provoked considerable hostility among those in positions of authority.

Two otherwise unlikely groups now unite against him: the Pharisees, who resent Roman rule, and the Herodians, who cooperate with it. Under ordinary circumstances, they would have little in common; nevertheless, they are united by a single purpose—to bring about the removal of Jesus.

They begin with calculated flattery: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere ... and show deference to no one." Then comes the question designed to destroy him: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

If Jesus says yes, he appears to endorse Roman oppression, If he says no, he can be arrested for treason. In either case, they believe that they have placed him in an impossible position. Jesus asks for a denarius—the daily wage of a labourer. It bears the image of Tiberius Caesar and the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Many devout Jews would not even touch such a coin because its image and claim to divinity offended their faith. Yet the Pharisees and Herodians produce one at once, exposing their own compromise. Jesus asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answer, "Caesar's."

Then comes the saying that has echoed through history: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." This is not a clever evasion; it is a profound teaching about responsibility and allegiance. Jesus thereby reminds both his questioners and us that human life entails responsibilities within two distinct, though related, realms.

Our earthly responsibilities; This is the realm of government, taxation, work, financial markets, public services and citizenship. Because we benefit from society, we contribute to it. We pay taxes not only because the law requires it, but because public life—and especially the welfare of the vulnerable—depends upon our shared contribution.

Our divine calling; This is the realm of worship, holiness, justice and compassion: the call to live as citizens of God's Kingdom. It shapes our values, forms our conscience and claims our ultimate loyalty.

These two responsibilities are distinct, but they cannot be entirely separated, for our allegiance to God must shape the manner in which we fulfil our duties within society. The challenge, both then and now, arises where these realms intersect. In that place, public duty and religious conviction cannot always be separated with ease. Christians are therefore called to exercise careful judgement, spiritual discernment and moral courage, particularly when fidelity to the Gospel carries a personal or social cost.

Jesus did not speak in the context of global instability, enduring financial crisis or energy uncertainty nor did he contend with a continuous news cycle, public controversy amplified

through social media, or economic forecasts displayed across digital screens. Nevertheless, his words address our present circumstances with enduring force.

The Bible does not offer a detailed programme for every financial, political or international crisis, nor does it prescribe how we should vote. It does, however, give us enduring principles by which our judgement and conduct may be formed:

God's concern embraces the whole of life; no part of human experience lies beyond divine care.

God's compassion attends to particular need; to those facing redundancy, to families struggling to meet their obligations and to young people anxious about the future. God's justice demands a faithful response; greed, inequality, exploitation and every system that oppresses the poor must be confronted.

Wherever injustice is found, within personal conduct, public policy or global structures—the people of God are called to resist it, for it has no place in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." The coin bears Caesar's image and may therefore be rendered to Caesar.

Humanity, however, bears the image of God and belongs ultimately to God. The contrast is therefore decisive: taxes may be owed to earthly authority, but the whole of our lives—our conscience, our worship, our conduct and our hope—belongs to God.

To give to God what is God's is therefore not one obligation among many; it is the allegiance that shapes every other duty. Christ therefore calls us to fulfil our earthly responsibilities with honesty, integrity and concern for the common good, while offering to God the undivided allegiance of our hearts and lives.

To Caesar: what is rightly required for the ordering and welfare of society.

To God: lives marked by faith, love, hope, justice and compassion.

So, may we encourage one another to live out this calling with gentleness and courage. As we worship, work and share the joys and burdens of our neighbours, may God make our life together a place of welcome, compassion and hope. And wherever the coming week may take us, may we remember that we bear God's image, rest in God's love and belong wholly to God.

Fr Bill Addy