

Matthew 22 15-22 October 29<sup>th</sup> 2017

Two questions for you: The first is “Which of these is most important to you? A member of your family, your country of birth, your faith in God, or the political party you support?” Please keep your answer in mind for the time being.

The second question which may be easier, is more like a quiz question: What is on each side of a new £1 coin? Of course, the Queen’s head is on one side – but the other? The answer is that the new pound coin (now with 12 sides) has on its obverse a rose, a thistle, a leaf and a shamrock. Everyone knows and is probably satisfied with the fact that in this country, the Queen’s profile is on one side of a coin. The Queen, not least as the head of the Church of England, is a well-respected and well-loved figure, so we have no dilemma with her head appearing on our coins.

Imagine though that we lived in Germany in the 1940’s and coins had been minted with Hitler’s head. Imagine too, that there were words implying that we had to worship Hitler in some way. Such a coin would have challenged both our behaviour and our identity. Would we then have used such a coin? I am glad to say it is a completely hypothetical question - Hitler never did mint such a coin – though he did plan to do so.

I have given you a picture of a denarius on the welcome sheet. One **denarius** is believed to have been a Roman soldier's daily pay and was also the coin used to pay taxes. The denarius plays a central part in the gospel account today.

The Pharisees and Herodians, annoyed that Jesus seems to be criticising them, decide to attack him. They introduce a conversation with flattering words speaking of Jesus' integrity, commitment to truth and equity. They then ask, ‘Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?’ It is a clever question... If Jesus says ‘yes’ then he is in collusion with Rome, justifying Roman occupation and the oppression of the Jews, and if he says ‘no’, he could be suspected of revolutionary sentiment against Rome. Jesus avoids answering by asking for a denarius.

The fact that someone can actually produce a denarius in the temple precinct may show in itself their own hypocrisy, since they are able to find a Roman coin in a place where they weren’t used. Jesus then asked a question with an obvious answer: ‘Whose head is on the coin?’ The denarius on one side would have read "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus Son of the Divine Augustus" and on the other side "Pontifex Maximus" (high priest). Jesus stuns the listeners with, ‘Give to the Emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God’s’. The responsibility is given right back to the questioner: there is no black and white answer here. It is not humanly possible to have only one

allegiance. Jesus acknowledges, even insists, that we all have multiple allegiances. His challenge, then, is to show that each person is left to fathom out how they prioritize their allegiances. Each person has to work out the details of how to live under a political system that he/she might not agree with.

My first question was about your own allegiances – which would you put first: your family, your country, God or your political party?

Here are three ways of looking at the problem. First, is simply putting yourself before anything else. You may know the lively satirical folk song about the self centered Vicar of Bray. The chorus says, ‘Whatsoever king may reign, then I’ll be the Vicar of Bray sir’. The song tells that when the Vicar of Bray lives in the days of King Charles then he supports the divine right of kings, when he lives under Queen Anne then he becomes a Tory and when he lives under King George he becomes a Whig. Whomever reigns, he still remains the Vicar of Bray. We smile at the song because he is fooling the system – the priority is himself!

The second way is living with the grey area when there are clearly only two allegiances. When I was ordained I had to swear allegiance to the Queen, as all priests do. I had no problem with her integrity and leadership at all, but I was concerned that if she suddenly behaved in a way that was against my conscience (although highly unlikely), then I couldn’t keep my oath and I would be personally compromised and in a considerable dilemma.

When I mentioned my dilemma to Bishop Michael Baughen (the bishop at the time) and, a wise man: his reply was not – ‘You can’t be ordained then’ – it was, I have to say, the day before the planned ordination - instead he said ‘if that happens Jane, then you will not be alone.’ He saw the complexities of allegiances and so encouraged me to take the oath. I am still here ...

The third way is living with and recognising that we all have many allegiances. We have a natural allegiance to the country we were born into – witness the frequently strong desire of refugees to return to their native land.

We have an allegiance to our families – we have often witnessed siblings fighting and arguing but as soon as someone external steps into the circle, they immediately support one another and stick together like glue – it is often the case that: ‘blood is indeed thicker than water’.

We all have an allegiance to this cathedral – to the music, the services and the fabric of the building. In two weeks on November 11<sup>th</sup>, we will remember with gratitude those who pledged allegiance to this country and often also to God: those who died on the battlefield so that others might live in peace.

Today, we might be challenged politically with whether we support a soft or hard Brexit or neither and how that relates to our prioritising God's love. The news has highlighted the downfall of Weinstein in the past weeks and how he abused his power. The brave women who spoke out against him made a decision about their own allegiances.

So what do we do? Jesus is urging us that as we consider our priorities, we always include our allegiance to God. When we come to reflecting upon our own unavoidable multiple allegiances, we are given a framework, but not a clear answer. All we know, is that we must always 'Give to God the things that are God's'.

So, recognising that we need to fathom the answers with God's help, we bring to God in prayer all our decision making.

Loving God, may I love You in all things and above all things.

May I remember that: nothing is good that is against Your Will, and all that is good comes from Your Hand.

Place in my heart a desire to please You first and foremost, no matter where I place my earthly allegiances.

Fill my mind continuously with thoughts of Your Love, so that I may grow in Your Wisdom, know how to behave and so enjoy Your Peace which passes all understanding.