

So here we go again ....tough questions. The Pharisees ask Jesus tough questions and Jesus answers with tough questions and / or answers. And what do we make of it all?

It made me think of an advert for Rolos a long time ago. I don't know if you remember it. A young couple on a bench sharing a packet of Rolos until it gets to the last one. Both look at the Rolo and the question is asked "do you love anyone enough to give them your last Rolo?" and of course everyone goes "ahhh" when the girl hands the boy the last Rolo. I'm rather partial to a Rolo. I might have considered sharing the Rolo but then more likely I would have eaten it myself – what is the point of half a Rolo? I have a very understanding husband where chocolate is concerned!

It's a tough question – the question of what we love most, or what we care about most. And tough questions are at the heart of our gospel reading today, as Jesus moves closer to the scene of his death, and both questions and answers take us beyond the expected into new directions.

That's probably why we don't like tough questions. We preferred to be entertained by easy questions, questions that make us and them look good, except when the tide turns, and we want to see a public figure exposed. Then we want to hear the audience on Question Time asking tricky, ambiguous questions, designed to make the person feel hunted and to trip themselves up in their answer. The Pharisees were ahead of their time in this game, they were asking Jesus these kinds of questions.

I have come to realise that the question is one of the oldest techniques to cause controversy. We hear it to perfection as part of any debate every time you switch on the radio. The art is to find the question to which there is no acceptable answer, so that any response digs the answerer into deeper and deeper trouble. Of course this changes the whole nature and purpose of a question, since the point of most questions is to elicit an answer, the assumption being that the one asking the question doesn't know the answer and is then, in some sense, dependent on the one who does. But the point of an unanswerable question is to put the questioner in a position of power.

The pharisees and the Herodians want to trap Jesus, to ask a double-edged question that would land him in difficulties whichever way he answered. They think they have found the perfect question, prefaced by a lot of flattery.

*you are a man of integrity; you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others.*

they think they massage his ego before they go in for the kill, forgetting that Jesus has no ego to flatter.

*Is it right to pay the imperial tax<sup>[a]</sup> to Caesar or not?"*

Here is the trap. Whichever way he answers, he will alienate some of his followers and that is exactly what the pharisees want: they want to erode Jesus power base without dirtying their own hands. They calculate that if Jesus replies that taxes should be paid to the illegal Roman usurper, he will anger his followers who hope and believe that he is the Messiah, the one who will reassert God's direct rule over his people and get rid of the Romans. But if he tries to please that group and says that taxes should be withheld, he will be liable for arrest by the civil powers and will frighten off the ordinary people who want no trouble with the authorities, they just want to hear Jesus talk about God and find consolation and healing.

They must have really thought hey had got him! But a few words of flattery cut no ice with Jesus and before they know it they are the ones scrabbling for an answer, with their carefully thought out strategy completely destroyed. Like all the other before they are made to look like fools who don't know their own business. They are supposed to be religious leaders but they never thought to introduce the

question of Gods rights into the debate. It is Jesus who does that, because he knows more about God than they do and that it as the heart of their hatred for him.

The most excellent teacher, as always Jesus words point to levels of meaning beyond their original purpose. They provide an unanswerable response to the guile of the Pharisees and give the hearers a further indication of the truth of his identity and mission.

Tough questions require tough answers.

*"give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

and Jesus gives a very tough answer because be sure about it this is not about secular society but about God. It is not the wily answer of the politician who avoids the question altogether, nor the answer of a diplomat trying to soothe troubles waters. Jesus gives an answer that conceals another question : who are the questioners really serving? Jesus brings them face to face with God and Gods demands on their lives. He deals directly with the issue of taxes, giving them a rightful place with Gods economy and faces them with the real issues: acknowledging God in their lives and recognising Jesus as God standing among them.

*"give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

Has become an almost byword in our world, making us feel that we can answer the tough questions of our priorities in our lives and balancing scared and secular, church and state. We so easily gloss over the Jesus answer to the tough question, missing the breathtaking idea offered in his answer. When we start to think about giving to God the things that are Gods, we find ourselves facing the impossible question – what does not belong to God?

God created heaven and earth; he provides for our daily needs, fills our lives with family and friends, shows his loves for us in thousands of ways. In response we are asked to love him with all our heart, mind, strength soul – everything. So, giving to God what is Gods is a huge challenge. It would be so much easier if God were like Caesar so that we knew for sure when we had paid our taxes. But no, God is not like Caesare, and we might need to, painfully and humiliatingly, recognize him over and over again and give him everything, not just what we consider to be his share.

Jesus used a coin to illustrate his message, a coin marked by Caesars head. Like that coin we too are marked, marked by God with the water of our baptism, with the words of our confirmation, for me with the oaths of my ordination. However, the head on the coin changes, we see it now as the Queens head on our coins is replaced by the head of our new King. Gods mark on us never changes and the mark God places on us never changes. We bear Gods image just as Gods hand bears ours.

The image can be sometimes difficult to recognise. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the marks that our business with the world has left on us: we are what we look like, what we have, what we wear, what we do, the company we keep. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the watery cross made on a forehead once upon a time, the image that God sees when he looks at us, the image that is engraved on the palm of his hand.

*"Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

Is this really an answer about taxation or an answer about love and best love? Where does our true love lie – the last Rolo or with God, heart, mind, strength soul – everything.