

# The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

## Sermon

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### **Sunday 22 October 2023: Angela Hannafin**

Good morning and welcome to Sunday's Sofa Sermon. It's time to find a comfy seat and once again explore the scriptures together. Today we are looking at Matthew's gospel.

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<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees met together to plot how to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. <sup>16</sup> They sent some of their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to meet with him. "Teacher," they said, "we know how honest you are. You teach the way of God truthfully. You are impartial and don't play favourites. <sup>17</sup> Now tell us what you think about this: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

<sup>18</sup> But Jesus knew their evil motives. "You hypocrites!" he said. "Why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup> Here, show me the coin used for the tax." When they handed him a Roman coin, <sup>20</sup> he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?"

<sup>21</sup> "Caesar's," they replied. "Well, then," he said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." <sup>22</sup> His reply amazed them, and they went away.

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Jesus meets some Pharisees, along with a local Roman support group (the little-known Herodians). Their speech is peppered with flattery, designed to get the Rabbi on side before they can trap him and arrest him. In their introduction they ascertain that Jesus is honest, a truthful teacher, impartial and without favourites. In light of his trusted character, can he answer their question: should they pay taxes to Emperor Caesar or not? Jesus, of course, knew that this was a trap. If he had said yes, many Jews would have been upset, since they hated the Romans and if he had said no, he would be in trouble with the Romans for undermining Caesar. Here he calls them hypocrites, that wonderful Greek word which literally means two-faced, since their motives are not pure. He asks them to show him the Denarius coin which would be used to pay for the imperial tax, a kind of local poll tax. And he asks them whose inscription is on it? Caesar's they reply. His reply back to them is a classic; "Give to Caesar what belongs to him, and give to God what belongs to him". This may be a short reply, but it's often been quoted from the King James version, "Render to Caesar what belongs to him, and render to God what belongs to him". We're going to think about this short phrase in the next few minutes.

What does this text mean and how does it relate to us?

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I think this is firstly a reminder about Christian identity. Paul wrote from prison to the church in Philippi that our citizenship is in heaven. Our identity is always primarily as believers of Jesus Christ, and we are journeying through this life with an ultimate destination being a world beyond this one. So don't worry if you don't have a passport, you've already got the travel documents you need through the death of Jesus Christ. Knowing we are citizens of heaven brings us great relief and strength for this life – we are part of God's worldwide church, we are filled with his Holy Spirit, he has forgiven us from the past and we have a new future with him. Because of God's great love and grace, we have purpose and hope. But there is also the reminder that we live as citizens on earth although heaven is a little way off. In the meantime, we live within the legal framework of our country and we have responsibilities and obligations which need to be made to God and also to the state. Jesus talked about both and recognised that we need to pay attention to both God and state. We must pay our taxes, we must pay our bills, we shouldn't cheat anyone or anything but pay what is owed. And that includes our Parish Share, which is paid by our parish each year. It's not a tax to the Diocese, regardless of what you might think, but a way of us expressing our identity as God's people, not just here but in the whole Diocese stretching from Ripon, over to Bradford, Huddersfield, Wakefield and the Leeds area. The money we pay – just over £80k this year here in Bardsey and East Keswick – ensures that sermons can be preached, bereaved families can be comforted, school assemblies can take place and baptism and weddings can be carried out.

Also, this is a reminder about priorities. The psalmist said 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it'. Christians believe that this is first and foremost God's world. Jesus told his disciples to seek the kingdom of God first in life, so he's not saying that our civil and spiritual responsibilities are equal. They never are. Paul wrote that "If with your mouth you confess Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved". This was hugely political statement. If you wanted to live in Rome at the time of the gospels being written you had to confess Kaiser Kurios – Caesar is Lord. If you didn't say this you could be subject to punishment. So by saying Jesus is Lord, God is put first every time. Jesus wasn't saying that we can compartmentalise our lives so that the things which are civil state have nothing to do with God. As one person wrote, the obligation to God covers all of life, so we must serve Caesar in a way that is honouring to God.

How does this help us with modern living? It's not always easy to work out what's Caesar's and what's God's but I think this is an encouragement to live in an

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engaged way. In other words, to accept that we are both citizens of heaven and people on earth and life needs to be about attending to both. Our creative prayer stations last week were a heart's cry to God for the horrors in the Middle East. None of us have any answers or feel we have any influence but we must keep praying to our heavenly Father who hears our cry. We've learned from our prayer course that in suffering sometimes it's better to ask 'where are you God' than 'why is this happening' since we can hear God better when we ask him to show us where he is. God is always with us, even in the hell that's taking place in Israel. We must keep engaging in whatever way we can, whether that's writing to our MP, keeping world issues in our prayers, supporting those we know living close by. Let's not be, as the old saying says, 'too spiritually minded to be any earthly good'. Disciples of Christ need to be engaged in modern living, praying for real issues and working out where their own personal engagement should be.

These are difficult times, and the scripture for today isn't easy to understand. However, if Jesus is Lord of our lives, then everything we have belongs to him and he is involved in everything. So let's try and approach this week as both citizens of heaven and also of earth, open to whatever God might be asking us to do to serve him and represent him.

Let's pray together:

God we recognise that we have the hope of heaven and the reality of a life on earth. Help us live with integrity as your people, help us stand up for truth and justice in this world, and help us be willing to let you have the whole of our lives. In Jesus' name. AMEN.