

Render to God what belongs to God

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I

The forms for my Poll Tax registration are sitting in my kitchen as I procrastinate about how to deal with them. The whole process of registration and the tax to which it is a prelude seem so despicable that I would gladly decide at this point not to fill in the form and begin the process of non-compliance. When Ministers say that this tax is fairer than the present system I feel anger and also a sense of powerlessness. There seems to be little doubt about the injustice of a tax which charges the richest person in a locality the same as the poorest. Yet another part of me recognizes what a fruitless gesture non-compliance would be, seeing that the mechanism exists to sequester my resources: I will have to pay it whether I like it or not. Is there room for manoeuvre in responding to this injustice? How best can I work constructively to remedy this injustice when there seems to be little space for any alternative action?

In situations like this there are two important tasks for me as a Christian. Firstly, I am determined to join with those who feel similar revulsion to this piece of legislation, with its regressive attitude to taxation and alarming implications for civil liberties. Secondly, while I have to renounce my desire for ready-made answers to my problem, whether in Scripture or Tradition, I must attend to what the Spirit is saying to the churches today, but use the necessary discernment to enable my path of discipleship to be in continuity with our ancestors in the faith. What I want to attempt in this article is to put on paper some of the clearing of the Biblical ground that enables me to continue the journey of faith and take into account this new challenge to our contemporary witness.

II

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth preached the reign of God and thus the vision of salvation and heaven which eschatological hope had kept alive. The present order would not last. The imminent arrival of the messianic age heralded new priorities and broadened horizons (Lk. 4.16; Matt. 11.2ff). But the Gospel portraits do not present Jesus as the wide-eyed visionary whose preaching was not matched by his practice. In Mark, for example, the paradigm for the Christian gospel, the rejection of the message of the Kingdom of God is accompanied by an emphatic distancing of Jesus from contemporary political arrangements. The messianic demonstration is followed by action in the Temple, which is condemned in words borrowed from the earlier denunciation of the Temple by Jeremiah and Isaiah's vision

of the Exile. The juxtaposition of action in the Temple with the cursing of the barren fig tree indicates the redundancy of an order whose priorities conflict with the Kingdom of God. Attempts to turn this polarisation into a dichotomy between the religious and the political miss the point that *de facto* political authority in Jerusalem was wielded by the priestly aristocracy and the Judaeen ruling class. The fact that the challenge is against this group rather than the Romans is merely indicative of the force of the former's political power. The concluding chapters of the synoptic gospels leave the disciples with little idea of what the messianic reign would be like. They can be left in little doubt, however, that followers of the Messiah will want to maintain a critical distance from contemporary institutions.

From a different point of view, the Gospel of John is misunderstood if the tag 'the spiritual Gospel' deceives us into thinking that it is little concerned with the politics of real life. Indeed, as David Rensberger has recently reminded us, this Gospel insists that the key events in Christian life are highly political acts in which the participants demonstrate their allegiance to a different way of being the people of God.¹ For Nicodemus, who would be a secret disciple, and for the disciples who cannot cope with Jesus' eucharistic teaching in Jn. 6.51ff, the risk involved in participation in these acts is socially costly. Likewise in its treatment of Jesus's confrontation with Pilate there is a rival interpretation of kingship in which the 'non-worldly' (i.e. re-defined) understanding of kingship is articulated in the story: this King is one who washes his disciples' feet. Jesus' reply to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world', is not a statement about the location of God's Kingdom, but concerns the origin of the inspiration for Jesus' view of the Kingdom. Its norms are the result of God's spirit and righteousness. It is otherworldly in the sense that it is wrong to suppose that the definition of Kingship and Kingdom is to be found among this world's rulers or in their sway. This apparently inward-looking Gospel bids the followers of Jesus not to fight 'but remain in the world bearing witness to the truth before the rulers of synagogue and empire'².

Such distance from the powers that be and such a questioning of unquestioning subservience is to be found even in that passage which has formed the cornerstone of conformity and participation in the Establishment: Romans 13. A reading of the passage indicates quite clearly that subservience to the powers is not a matter of blind obedience. The reason for obedience is that it serves the good of the readers. What is offered is an ideal pattern which states should implement. It is a message to the ruled rather than the rulers, possibly because some of the ruled in the Christian community in Rome were actually questioning the necessity or indeed competence of the State. The necessity of the State is re-affirmed. It is a mark of the old age which is still very much in force. But the State has to seek the good of its subjects. Such good must be defined by the character of God's goodness (the word elsewhere in Romans refers to that goodness). In so far as the State fails to do this or interprets the good as what serves the interests of the powerful, it undermines the contractual obligation so

carefully enunciated in these verses. What is more, Paul's expectation of Christ's coming and reign necessarily casts its shadow over the permanence and rightness of any political regime. All, by virtue of their pursuit of sectional interest, are marked with the mark of the Beast: a reading of Romans 13 will always need the corrective of Rev. 13, so that accommodation and co-operation can at all times be seen for what they are in the 'messianic light' (to borrow a phrase of Theodor Adorno).

The uncompromising rejection of State power and accommodation in the book of Revelation challenges the complacent and encourages the hard-pressed. In its stark contrast between the Lamb and the Beast, the Whore of Babylon and the Bride of New Jerusalem, it juxtaposes the choices facing men and women and reminds the Lamb's followers of the dangers of becoming entangled in a political system based on a completely new set of values. What is particularly disturbing is the ruthless probing into the motives behind the benevolence of the powerful. The deceit involved by practitioners and gullible recipients is frightening. The remedy is simple: social separation. 'Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandment of God and the faith of Jesus' (14.12). As Klaus Wengst has put it: this sentence can be regarded as a summary of all that John wants to say. 'This endurance puts Christian life into the role of the outsider.'³

Thus, while still living in an age which is passing away, the churches must make choices about the extent of their involvement and participation by judging just how far particular policies and political orders manifest the way of the Messiah. This brief survey of merely some New Testament approaches indicates the complexity of a task in which one can expect to encounter many different opinions. But, when the churches today wrestle with the issues in a situation where inexorable integration into the current political system is a continuing process, the chances of critical awareness are greatly diminished and the dangers now mount that the churches will be used to baptize social, political and economic systems which are far from reflecting the righteousness of God.

III

The pattern of conflict, so often recognized as a dominant theme within the synoptic gospels, is all too often relegated to the 'spiritual' sphere. The persistence of the acceptance of such a separation is testimony enough to the pervasiveness of the dualism in contemporary theology⁴. No happier hunting ground for that separation between sacred and secular, spiritual and material, has been found than in the discussion about the Tribute Money. Here, surely, they say, is a passage which indicates that Jesus was not prepared to disturb the existing order? This view is buttressed by contemporary attempts to separate the Kingdom of God from the human kingdoms, rooted in Augustine's and Luther's emphatic separation of the human and divine realms⁵. Paul's unequivocal support for the payment of

taxes indicates that it *was* taken as an injunction to pay taxes to Caesar and recognize the demands of the State as legitimate (Rom. 13.6). But, then, Paul's setting, particularly the situation of the Roman Christians, left little room for manoeuvre. Whereas Jesus was not directly under Roman jurisdiction for much of his life, the Christians in Rome had no alternative to paying their taxes unless they wanted to court imprisonment and death.

Four ways of interpreting this passage have been canvassed which allow that Jesus was giving Caesar a valid role in the political life of his day⁶. The conventional assumption is that Jesus is allowing a limited autonomy to Caesar provided that this does not infringe the demands of God. Secondly, there is the view that what Jesus is recommending is a complete separation of spheres of influence under God between the spiritual and the temporal, between religion and politics. Thirdly, there is the view that the kings of the earth receive their sovereignty by divine permission and accordingly the saying means that by giving Caesar what is Caesar's the Jews would be giving God what is God's⁷. A fourth approach asserts that the second half of Jesus' reply 'Render to God what belongs to God' is to be understood as undermining the obligation to Caesar by subordinating it to obligation to God. The land of Israel belongs to God alone (Lev. 25.23), and no part of it may be handed over to a pagan ruler.

With regard to the second view, it is most unlikely that Jesus' words involved a separation between the sacred and secular spheres. That kind of separation, such a feature of our Western Christianity, was certainly not typical of the Judaism of Jesus' day. Jews regarded God as the creator of the world. The whole universe was seen as God's domain, and no earthly ruler had any absolute right of possession or authority. Thus, giving God what was God's due meant offering to the supreme ruler of the whole world all that belonged to God.

But why did Jesus not say this? A simple answer is that the context in which the question was asked demanded circumspection. Jesus was not here offering a definitive ruling on relations between his followers and the State, but a clever, if ambiguous, answer given in a situation where he had been put in a tight corner by his opponents.⁸ Ambiguity was an essential part of a response in a situation where there were those who were seeking to trap him in his speech (cf. Lk. 12.54). Luke, who was probably drawing on a version of the Passion Narrative that was independent of Mark, indicates that the answer *was* a factor in the accusation before Pilate (Lk. 23.2). That it was included as part of the basis for the case against Jesus should make us pause before assuming that the meaning of the saying is entirely transparent.

In any discussion of the passage it is important to note that Jesus' prophetic role and radical preaching could conceivably have comprised a programme for radical change and a short-term acceptance of the reality of Rome pending its demise in the face of the divine sovereignty. Such acceptance would then arise from the politico-religious strategy of one whose primary challenge was to the Jewish nation, its institutions and life as God's means of offering a light to the nations. The focus of attention on

Rome would have distracted attention from the inadequacies of the Jewish polity as a reflection of the order which God required⁹. We may compare the ministry of Jeremiah in this respect. Jeremiah had warned that Babylon was God's servant and that obedient well-being lay in submission (Jer. 27.44ff and 38.17ff) and a concomitant direction of the hearer's attention to the inadequacies of their response to divine justice. So this lack of evidence of Jesus' concern with Rome should not be interpreted as a separation between the religious and the political but between the primary and secondary spheres of political concern for Jewish prophets.

The discussion takes an interesting turn when Jesus makes his opponents show him a coin. Jesus diverts the question from mere theory to the reality of the means of exchange whereby the tribute was expected to be paid. Whether we can place great weight on the fact that he himself does not appear to possess a coin is uncertain, but it may be another indication that Jesus is here dealing with a jurisdiction and set of issues both unfamiliar to a Galilean and incompatible with the style of life which he had been leading. After being presented with a coin bearing the image of the Roman emperor he asks whose image and superscription it is. Why? Is it in order to indicate rights and duties to the one whose image is before him? Or does he wish to point out that the possession of the coin by Jews is evidence that the possessors are contaminated by an alien ideology which, in direct contradiction to Jewish law, allowed images of human beings to be engraved? Those who possess such objects of an alien system might expect, therefore, to have to abide by the rules of that system. As Bruce comments: 'whatever else belongs to God, a coin which by its very form and appearance contravenes God's Law cannot be regarded as his'¹⁰. Jesus' response, therefore, may indicate that participants in the Roman economic system were bound to pay the tax. But those who recognised the supremacy of God over the universe maintain their distance from Rome and its exploitative and idolatrous practices, a point noted by Robert Eisler¹¹:

Jesus ... rejects money on principle for himself and his disciples ... He postulates the gratuitous gift of all service to one's neighbour as an act of free love. Thus only the discourse on the tribute money becomes intelligible. The 'lovers of money' who carry about with them and possess the Roman emperor's money, and with it, the image of the 'lord of this world', the enemy of God who claims worship for himself, owe his money, the poll tax, to that lord. They have fallen away from God and so have irremediably incurred servitude and the payment of tribute to the emperor. But he, who like Jesus and his disciples disdains Caesar's money and the whole monetary system of the empire, and who enjoys with his brethren the loving communion of all possessions of the 'saints', such a one has renounced the service of idols and is no longer indebted to Caesar but merely to God, to whom he owes body, soul, thoughts, words and works—in short, everything....

Whether or not we agree entirely with Eisler's interpretation, it is a

potent reminder that Jesus' reply must be set within the context of the difficult discussion of appropriate responses to the lordship of God within the limitations imposed by Roman sovereignty. That is not a fatalistic acceptance of the powers that be, but a recognition that there is a price to pay for 'supping with the Devil'. Maybe that is what has to be done, though, if Eisler is right, that was not the only option open to the people of God. Communities of protest which could maintain the counter-culture of God's holiness could offer a way of keeping out of Caesar's grip, though a way that may have meant some political powerlessness in the abandonment of the political process. The appropriate political response might be maintained by cutting oneself off from the system in ways possible in the wilderness of Judea but inconceivable in most modern societies.

IV

I have concentrated on the discussion about the tribute money. There is, of course, another passage dealing with the Temple Tax in Matthew 17.24—27. Here Jesus argues that God's parenting is the key to the whole business of taxation. God's rule is different from that of an earthly king: just as kings do not tax their own children, so neither does God. God is like a father who provides for the children's needs (cf. Luke 11.5ff). The payment of the tax is made on pragmatic grounds, and even then payment is provided by God¹². At first sight, the discussion about the payment of tribute to the Emperor seems to show Jesus offering a different approach and to accept the right of kings of the earth to levy their taxes. We have seen reasons why such a reading of the story might not be as obvious as it first appears. The story is included not to give advice over taxation (even though it may well have been used in this way, if Romans 13.8ff is anything to go by). Rather, it is an example of Jesus' wisdom and insight. He refuses to take sides in a situation where both options left much to be desired. There is nothing particularly commendable about the refusal to pay taxes if it is to result (as it did in the disastrous revolt against the Romans in AD 66—70) in wholesale destruction of human life. The Zealot option, which refuses any kind of accommodation with Caesar, is attractive in its refusal to compromise but potentially disastrous in the course of action which can ensue. The evidence suggests that Jesus did not want to be identified with the Zealots. This was not only because of the deep-rooted tradition of non-violence but also because the Zealot strategy was in fact a much more reactionary one than his own. They were merely in the business of reforming the status quo so that the Temple could function properly. Jesus was much more concerned to establish a new pattern of relations with God where injustices rooted in religious practice would also be rooted out. Jesus' political option was altogether more radical¹³.

The story is placed in Mark's Gospel after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and 'cleansed' the Temple. Meek acceptance of Caesar is what one would expect of an élite for whom the Temple was a central part of their power.

Jesus had challenged that power and the whole ideology which undergirded it, a fact dramatically reinforced with the destruction of its mystique at the moment of Jesus' death (Mk. 15.38). In a sense the issue of taxation was a diversion from the major challenge to the Jewish status quo which had been made: the discussion of the tribute avoided the issue whether the Jewish nation would accept its messiah and his way. In a situation of overarching political and economic power such as wielded by the Romans the question of tribute demanded a recognition of what was involved in complicity with the Roman system and a frank recognition of what were constructive and what were futile ways of furthering the life and prophetic witness of the people of God. Jesus did not shirk paying the ultimate price of his life when there was no other option available, but to the last in Gethsemane there was always the struggle to avoid paying that ultimate price.

Where Jesus would have agreed with the Zealots is in emphasising that rendering to God takes precedence over all else (cf. Matt. 6.24 and Acts 5.29). How that will be done will depend on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. That may be illustrated by the struggles of our sisters and brothers in the varied situations of Latin America. What seems to be a relatively harmless gesture of human compassion in the context of Brazil will be a life-threatening act in El Salvador. In such situations the acts of martyrdom are not confined to the moment of the termination of one's life but to the incessant demand to witness appropriately and wherever possible effectively to the justice and peace of God. We shall not expect those acts of martyrdom to be uniform in their direction though they will have a common focus of seeking to practise the justice of the God who stands over against all political systems and refuses to be identified totally with them. They may not be at all times as far-reaching as we would like. There may well be acute differences between those of us who seek to protest and to promote justice. At all times vigilant attention to the detail of the motives of the oppressor and awareness of the self-righteousness of the victims can assist in the prosecution of justice for the poor and the gentle but firm challenge to the powerful. Nothing less can be rendered to the God to whom all creation owes allegiance¹⁴.

- 1 D. Rensberger, *Johannine Community and Liberating Faith*, Philadelphia 1989, (to be published in Britain as *Overcoming the World*).
- 2 Rensberger, op. cit. p. 100.
- 3 K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 133f.
- 4 See N. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* and F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, concisely expressed by R. McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation*.
- 5 See Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol 2 Part 1.
- 6 There is a survey of research in Bruce's article in Bammel and Moule, *Jesus and the Politics of his Day*, pp. 250ff.
- 7 J.D.M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament*, p. 335f.
- 8 Bruce, op. cit. p. 259.
- 9 See further M. Borg, *Conflict Politics and Holiness in the Teaching of Jesus* and G.B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation*.
- 10 Bruce, op. cit. p. 260.
- 11 R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*, pp. 332ff and cf. Bammel, op. cit. pp. 32ff.
- 12 R. Bauckham, *The Bible and Political Debate*, p. 75.
- 13 M. Clevonot, *Materialist Approaches to the Bible*, p. 93.
- 14 This article is based on material for a forthcoming Jubilee pamphlet on disestablishment and from C. Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, SPCK 1989.