The King without a Coin
Luke 20:19-26

If you're not a native English speaker you may not know this, the rest of us should, but the Bible has had a profound effect on the shaping of the English language. Ever since Wyclif and Tyndale and then the King James Bible, whole phrases have come into the language straight out of the Book. And we were talking about this around the dinner table a week or so ago because one of my girls is reading 2 Samuel and she came across the phrase, referring to Saul and Jonathan dying in battle – 'how the mighty have fallen' (2 Sam 1:25). And she knew that phrase, it's a kind of a stock phrase in our family, but until that point had no idea where it came from. And you could add to that, 'there's nothing new under the sun', 'you reap what you sow', 'love covers a multitude of sins', ' it's just my cross to bear', 'a drop in a bucket', 'a fly in the ointment', 'a labour of love' and 'a leopard can't change its spots' to name but a few.

And Luke's account here of Jesus answering this question gives us another one: 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's'. It's a masterful answer: it's short, pithy, cutting to the heart, silencing-the-critics wisdom. But whilst people might know it, knowing what Jesus meant by it is a totally different ballgame.

We're going to look at three things: firstly - a sincere question? - question mark; secondly, paying back the debt and thirdly, the king without a coin – a phrase I've borrowed from Tim Keller, and which is the title of the whole message.

A sincere question?
Now, Luke tells us in v19 that the religious leaders want to arrest Jesus. It's Passover week, and pressure is beginning to mount. Jesus has exposed them by cleansing the temple and they know, as we saw last week, that He told the parable of the tenants against them. And they want rid of Him. But they're also afraid of the crowd – what if the people turn against them?

So they set out to try and trap him. They tactically withdraw, and watch from a distance as they send in some spies pretending to be sincere. But their aim was clear: catch Him in something He says and then we can hand Him over to the Romans and they can dispose of Him. Then, we'll be free of Him *and* free of guilt in the eyes of the people.

And so the spies start off by complimenting Jesus. And they compliment him in three ways, v21: 'Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly' – literally, you teach and speak straight. You say it as it is, Jesus, you're a straight talker. Second, 'and show no partiality' - you're not the kind of guy to try and curry favour with the leaders, you're not afraid to put the politicians' backs up, Jesus, that's why we admire you so much, and thirdly, you 'truly teach the way of God.' Now, all that they say is true of course, but it's all designed to disarm Him, to make Him drop His defenses, to draw Him into an indiscretion. 'Hey, Jesus, we're real fans of yours, we listen to your sermon podcast every week, we've got all your books, we love the way you don't mince your words and you stick it to the leaders and you just teach the Bible the way it is. So will you answer us this question that's been bugging us?'

Now, let's be clear - Jesus never minds genuine seekers. He welcomes them. God invites people to taste and see that the Lord is good. So if when it comes to Jesus, you know you're not there yet, but you're serious and genuinely seeking and coming humbly, that's ok – keep coming, keep asking questions. But these guys, they're just shallow, and they're using flattery and compliment in the worst possible way.

But, in passing, we can learn something from them: you see, the person who says good things about you, that make you feel good about yourself, may not be your friend. Your real friend may be the one who says the hard stuff, the stuff you don't want to hear. Proverbs says 'faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy' (27:6). And the person who flatters you, may be less a god-send and more an agent of the enemy, because whilst the gospel lifts us up and tells us we are loved beyond measure, it first tells us the hard truth about ourselves. God loves us enough, He is a faithful friend enough to wound us: to prick the balloon of our pride, to dent our self-sufficiency, to humble us and bring us to the point where we know we need Him more than anything else.

But these guys have come as enemies, and so they flatter. And then they ask the question: v22, 'Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?' It's ironic isn't it, that Jesus has just entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, making the claim to be king, not just of Israel, but of every nation, and they try and trick Him with a question about another king.

And it is a trick. It is a trap. And it's clever.

Because whilst the people labored under the weight of taxes and duties, that wasn't their question. They don't ask, should we pay VAT, or income tax, or inheritance tax to Caesar? They ask, should we give *tribute* to Caesar? And that is something very different.

You see, the tribute tax was a head tax, a poll tax, a tax on the individual themselves: One denarius a year for the privilege of being under the authority of Rome. One denarius a year for the privilege of enjoying pax romana. One denarius a year for the honour of being invaded and occupied by a pagan enemy.

Now, a denarius wasn't a huge amount of money – about a day's wage for a farm labourer, so it wasn't a huge sum. But it was huge in its symbolism. Having to pay tribute was a graphic picture of their subjection and humiliation under Rome. Can you imagine a more powerful or concrete example of your defeat by another power than being forced to pay for the privilege of being subjected? And for the Jews it was even worse - the tax supported a pagan government with its state-sponsored worship of idols. So no wonder that when it was first introduced in 6AD, a fellow called Judas the Galilean led a revolt against the Romans because of it.

So, although the men asking the question have zero sincerity, others would have been asking and wrestling with just this question, and doing so with very real sincerity. Should I do this or shouldn't I? If I'm serious about wanting to honour

God and obey His law, how can I pay taxes to such a pagan regime? But if I don't pay – think of the consequences – for me, for the family. And that question is not of minimal interest to us today. Many of our governments are adopting policies in direct conflict with the word of God, whether that is on abortion, or so-called gay marriage, or end of life issues, or care of the poor and the foreigner. And the question is what should our attitude be to rulers and paying taxes to rulers who don't fear God? And that's the question they're asking.

And that is why it was so clever. That's why they think they've got Him. You see, if you pay the tribute – you are compromising, you're collaborating; if you don't you are rebelling. And they're asking Him: Jesus, are you a true patriot, or are you just another compromiser? When you talk about the kingdom of God coming, are you a real revolutionary, who's going to make a difference, or are you just so much hot air? Which side are you on, Jesus?

Now, nothing much changes does it? In our polarized political landscape, both poles want to claim Jesus for their own side, or for their battleground issue. Jesus, are you democrat or republican? Conservative or labour? For this issue, or against it?

And these spies think they've got Him, because if Jesus says, 'don't give tribute' – He's a revolutionary, and they can hand Him over to Rome and let Rome liquidate Him and they can walk away without any blood on their hands. But if He says, 'do give tribute' He will have lost all credibility in the eyes of the people who were putting their hope in Him to deliver them from just this kind of oppression.

So they want an either/or answer: Jesus, are you a revolutionary or a collaborator? Do tell us. And how He answers will either alienate the people or put Him in a Roman prison cell awaiting execution. So, it's win–win for the religious leaders. Like a political candidate who is interviewed on Live TV, and asked a question He badly fluffs, from now on out Jesus is sunk with no hope of recovery.

Or is he?

Paying back the debt

Well, Jesus sees straight through them, Luke tells us, 'he perceived their craftiness' (v23) – the same word Paul used of satan deceiving Eve (2 Cor 11:3) – Jesus knows they're trying to engineer His downfall, and in response He gives anything but a politician's answer.

V24: "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness [literally ikon –image-] and inscription does it have?" And looking at the coin, they reply, "Caesar's".

And they're right. This is a Denarius from around Jesus' time and you can see that the front has the image of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription in abbreviated form: TIberius CAESAR DIVIni AUGusti Filius AUGUSTUS: "Tiberius, Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." You see, Tiberius' father – Caesar Augustus - had been

declared a god by the Roman senate, and so Tiberius – and the denarius with his image – is making the claim that he is son of god. Well, that's the front. On the back is an image of his mother, Livia, with the words, Pontif Maxim: High Priest. All on the one coin: Tiberius, Lord, son of god, high priest. In other words, to quote one commentator (Bock) it had 'Roman sovereignty minted all over it.' Sovereignty and pagan idolatry.

But in getting them to produce the coin Jesus has already turned the tables on them. They are carrying around *in their pockets* a coin with an image and inscription that for a Jew was nothing short of blasphemous. So whatever else they might say, whatever else they might have claimed, they were *already* under Roman sovereignty – it was a fact of life they carried in their pockets. They are already using the currency of Rome without blinking an eyelid. It's Caesar's money – it's got his name and authority stamped all over it, and by having it and using it they were already accepting the fact that he had some authority over them. So, before Jesus really says a word He has taken the wind from their sails. Which of course is one of the reasons He leaves them speechless.

But then He goes on, v24 again, 'whose likeness and inscription does it have?' 'Caesar's', v25: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Now, did you notice the change of verb that Jesus uses? They asked, 'is it lawful *to give* tribute to Caesar', but Jesus doesn't reply, 'give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' He uses a verb that gets translated here 'render', which means 'pay back, give back, as in paying back a debt that which is Caesar's and pay back, give back to God what is God's.'

And if you can see that subtle shift then you can begin to understand why Jesus' answer is so clever, why it silences the spies, because it is multilayered.

Firstly, Jesus is saying, there is such a thing as civic debt – and you must pay it. Now, people try and argue all sorts of things about the size of government and separation of church and state from this verse on its own, but whilst there are many things Jesus may or may not be saying here, one thing He *is* saying is that there is such a thing as civic debt, and that the state has a right to raise support from its citizens. And that even goes for pagan governments like Rome, governments who do things and espouse things we may rightly deplore. The state has the right to exist and expect its citizens to contribute to its functions, and doing so does not violate one's commitment to God. These men live in the state – they have Caesar's money in their pocket, and they therefore have a debt to the state, which they must pay.

And yet Jesus' answer is darker than that alone. Render, pay back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, is not a simple call to civil obedience. It's double edged: The money is Caesar's, so give it back to him, but don't give him the allegiance that belongs to God alone. I mean, just ask yourself, what does it mean to render, to pay back what a tyrant like Caesar deserves? What does it mean to pay back what a politician instituting laws in defiance of God's law deserves? It's not limp, unquestioning obedience or allegiance is it? Can you see how 'pay back to Caesar or Zuma, or Mugabe, or Cameron or Obama,

what they deserve, what they are owed, how that takes on a very different light? What does such a ruler deserve when it's payback time?' And that, again, is why Jesus leaves them marveling in silence.

You see they have asked an either/or question: are you a revolutionary Jesus, or a compromiser, a collaborator? But Jesus won't be pushed into those categories. With Jesus, it is neither, withdraw from the public square and throw rocks from the sidelines, nor is it political revolution and 'man the barricades!', and neither is it roll-over and let them do what they want.

And the reason is that Jesus is about a different kind of revolution, His is a different kind of Kingdom. You know, most politicians come in promising change, don't they? Replace him, with me, and your life will be better. That lot over there, they're the problem, Caesar's the problem, I'm your answer. High taxes, or not enough taxes, they're the problem. But Jesus isn't just another political revolutionary come to fix the system. Because politicians of the other colour are not what's wrong with the world. Taxes aren't what's wrong with the world. The Times newspaper once asked a number of authors to each submit an article entitled, 'what is wrong with the world?' GK Chesterton's essay was the shortest. He wrote, 'dear sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, GK Chesterton.' What's wrong with the world – 'I am'. I'm what's wrong with the world. As someone else has said, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. And Jesus knows that it is not the political or the taxation system that needs transforming – it's our hearts.

And so He says, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, *and to God the things that are God's.'* Now, you've got to remember that this is all following hard on the heels of two dramatic events. Firstly, Jesus has cleansed the temple: he's kicked out the money changes and the livestock sellers and He's saying – give back to God what is His. Hand over the temple, give back to its proper use what is God's. Then Jesus has just told them the parable of the tenants. These tenants of the vineyard, who were failing to give the owner what was his – that powerful picture of Israel and her leaders failing to produce the fruit of living in the promises and the blessings of God. So give back to God what is His, bear the fruit of walking in right relationship with Him: give back to God the honour, the love, the obedience, the faith, the fear, the worship you owe Him.

And yet rendering to God the things that are God's goes way deeper than. Jesus has just asked these men to show Him a denarius and He's asked 'whose image is on it?' Caesar's. So give back to Caesar what has Caesar's image on it. And now He's saying 'and give back to God what has God's image on it.' So just ask yourself, as these men would have been stood there asking themselves, what is it that you and I have with God's image stamped on it, that I am supposed to give back to Him, that I am supposed to pay back my debt to Him? And the answer is, it's me. It's you. It's your life. You have been created in the image of God, you are a bearer of God's image. And the simply stunning thing Jesus is saying here is, sure, give to Caesar what is his, but give to God your very self, your whole life. Caesar has his set bounds, there is such a thing as civic debt, and you need to honour that, but there are no bounds to God's dominion over you, no limits over

which you can say to Him, this far and no further. It's you, all of you, your time, your mind, your money, your ambitions, your relationships, your politics, everything. Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian famously said, 'there is not one square inch of all creation over which Christ does not cry, 'mine!'' And that includes you and every part of your life.

You see, Jesus refuses to engage in their kind of partisan politics. But neither does He withdraw and retreat to a cave in a desert. Caesar and God are not two equals, vying for power. Caesar has his authority, but only so much as God gives him, and there will be payback time. But God is sovereign over all. And our obligation is not to God or Caesar, as if it was either or. It is God and Caesar. But that obligation to Caesar and how that is going to be worked out is going to be totally transformed by seeing that every part of our lives – our very self – is God's and is to be given back to Him.

But here's the question: where do you get that kind of transforming power from? Where do you get the power to love your enemies, even your political enemies? Where do you get the power to serve, the power to be an agent of change, not of short term political change, but change first in your heart, and then seeing that spill over into the lives of others? And if there is some sense in which we are indebted to Caesar, to pay back our civic debt, as we stand before God and realize how in debt to Him we are – for all those things we've done that we shouldn't have done and not done that we should have done, how can we ever hope to pay back our debt to God? Where does this debt paying, heart-transforming power come from?

The King without a Coin

I don't know if you saw it, but this little episode with this coin, it's deeply ironic isn't? It's like the clash of two kingdoms in miniature. Jesus gets them to produce a coin from their pockets with the picture of a man on it, Tiberius, who is claiming to be Lord, Son of God, and High Priest; as Jesus is standing there as Lord, Son of God and High Priest. But these two kings could not be more different. One, Tiberius, was obviously a king, Lord of the greatest, most powerful empire the world had seen, and he had all the money in the world – with his name and his picture stamped on every bit of it. But the other, Jesus, had nothing, in fact He even had to ask someone else for a coin. And whoever heard of a king without a coin?

And yet, it was this man, Jesus, who was the real King, with more power and authority than Caesar could ever dream of. And yet He had humbled Himself, and come not as a king but as a servant. But it is precisely because Jesus humbled Himself – even to the point of death - that you and I can find the power to change and to love, and to have our debt to God paid off. You see, Jesus tells these men to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. But before the week is out, they will hand over to Caesar more than just this money. Whilst this time the spies will withdraw speechless, before the next Sabbath their masters will have handed Jesus over to Pilate, the Roman Governor, on other charges. They will hand over the one who supremely bears the image of God, His true Son, the one rightful High Priest to the power of Rome. And this king without a coin, *the* image bearer,

will be crucified on a cross, the chosen instrument of torture and execution of the other king, Tiberius. But in allowing that to happen, Jesus will pay the debt you and I owe to God. His life, for your life. In the words of Paul: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.' (2 Cor 8:9).

And at the cross, the Son of God took upon Himself the poverty and the exclusion you deserve, He took upon Himself the debt you owe to God, so that in exchange you might know His riches. And when you understand that, when you get a glimpse of His grace towards you – His riches to you, at His expense, and it sinks in, and you see and understand how He has loved you, even though you don't deserve it, you'll find your heart being transformed towards your enemies – political or otherwise.

But it will also give you the courage to fight injustice and iniquity – not through the political revolution of a zealot, but through the heart transforming power of the gospel, and acts of self-sacrificial love, in response to the King without a coin's self-sacrificial love to you.