

THE OBSERVANT TAX-COLLECTOR

Before being called by Christ to be one of his twelve Apostles, St Matthew was a tax collector operating in a customs house, somewhere in the north of Galilee. Since this profession required that he be able to read, write and especially keep records, these skills he would put to good use in writing his gospel account of Jesus' mission. His literary style, as an evangelist, may be more artificial than that of St Luke, but there is no doubt that the gospel excerpt you have just heard is truly dramatic. The question put to Jesus, as to whether it was permissible for Jews to pay tribute to Caesar, gives a clear insight into the minds and strategy of the Pharisees. They were trying to walk Jesus into a political trap that would set him at odds with the Roman authorities, who were the rulers of Israel at that time, or, failing that, would discredit him before his own people. To avoid giving rise to suspicion of their intent, they decided not to get personally involved themselves. They sent some of their disciples along to Christ instead. It is quite likely that the leaders of the Pharisees stayed in the background because they wanted the followers of Herod, the Roman appointed tetrarch of Galilee, to take part also in the plot against Jesus, even though these Herodians, who openly advocated cooperation with the Romans, were normally their most bitter enemies.

The mock tributes to Jesus by this delegation, mention of his honesty, his fearlessness, his disregard for the status of those he encountered, all this flattery coming from people who normally were hostile to him merely highlights the hypocrisy of their praise. Then the trap was sprung: "tell us what is your own opinion? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Were Christ to answer, "Pay the tax," then he would stand accused of collaboration with the Roman oppressors, and would incur the scorn of ordinary Jews each of whom had to pay a poll tax, from the age of twelve for women and fourteen for men. Were he to advocate non-payment, he could be arrested for sedition by the Roman authorities. Jesus' response, however, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," left them confounded, and they slunk away. But Jesus' reply left the matter in suspense, because it did not touch upon the right of the Romans to rule Israel, nor did it enumerate precisely the things of Caesar or those of God.

The opposing claims of God and state were left to be decided by the informed conscience of each individual, as they still are to this day. But there remains the warning of Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, that "no one can serve two masters; one cannot be the slave of both God and wealth" (Mt 6:24). Wealth in early OT times was seen as created by God, and bestowed on patriarchs, kings and leaders who had roles of special responsibility. Later on, wealth ceased to be regarded as a gift from God. "Woe to those who join house to house and field to field, until everywhere belongs to them," Isaiah warned (Is 5:8), and Jesus himself said, "alas for you who are rich; you are having your life of ease now" (Lk 6:24). The world and all its resources were created by God for the benefit of all human beings without exception, and this must usually obtain alongside the right to private property, whether inherited or acquired by personal enterprise. It is the task of government to seek balance between policies that will help the common good of all the citizens. And taxation is still one of the most common means of achieving this.