

## **Exodus 23:12-23**

<sup>12</sup> Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. <sup>13</sup> Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.

### **The Annual Festivals**

<sup>14</sup> Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. <sup>15</sup> You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt.

No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

<sup>16</sup> You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. <sup>17</sup> Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.

<sup>18</sup> You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my festival remain until the morning.

<sup>19</sup> The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

### **The Conquest of Canaan Promised**

<sup>20</sup> I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. <sup>21</sup> Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him.

<sup>22</sup> But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.

<sup>23</sup> When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out,

### Matt 22:15-22 Dramatic reading

It was question time question time in the temple. Jesus had been telling story after story, that was his way, stories that raised a smile, stories that made people think, stories in which people sometimes recognised themselves. But now it was question time, questions to challenge Jesus, questions to trap him. The Pharisees had sent their disciples with a question for Jesus, and a few hot-headed Herodians were with them too. They tried first to butter him up maybe they thought that would get the crowds on their side. They called him teacher, they told him that they recognised his integrity, his impartiality, his concern for truth. And then came their question. It was a good one. "Teacher, Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor?" If Jesus said no, they could denounce him to the authorities If he said yes, many Jews would see him as a supporter of Roman rule. Jesus knew what they were up to and he had an answer for them, an excellent answer. "Bring me the coin you use to pay your tax," he said, and they brought him a Roman coin, a denarius. "Whose head, whose title is on this coin?" he asked them. "The Emperor's," they replied. "Well then," said Jesus, "give the emperor what belongs to the emperor..." he paused, "and make sure that you give God what belongs to God." They were stunned. Everyone was stunned. A brilliant answer. No doubt they would come back with another clever question, but for now they went away.

When I was a pastor in California I inherited the duty of organizing and running a weekly men's breakfast group. The aim was more 'community building' rather than "religious" and we ranged far and wide over many topics, though they frequently turned to me or Tom, the local Episcopal priest, for a Scriptural viewpoint. They were a fascinating bunch, Tom the conservative priest, a few members of each of our congregations, a lapsed Roman Catholic and at least two avowed atheists.

They were all elderly and had been meeting for years and had a deep trust of one another. Yet there were certain things they had never shared.

One morning while somehow drifting into the realms of "civic duty" and "loyalty", John suddenly announced that during the Viet Nam war he had been first jailed then served as a medic because he was a Conscientious Objector. Bill then confessed to have been jailed in early 1940's as a Communist party organizer; Matt then told of how he had worked on the fringes of the Hollywood movie business and had appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Chuck then said "Oh we must have appeared on different days because I was there too".

I did say they were an interesting group!

The common denominator of all their stories was loyalty.

It is Jesus's loyalty which is being challenged in this scripture.

He is approached and quizzed by his enemies. The goal is to trick Jesus, to see where he stands on the hot-button issue of taxation and in the process paint him in a negative light with some significant portion of the population, no matter what his answer.

Would he pump the party line of their Roman overlords and say, "Taxes are fun!" thus alienating all those who felt it unjust and idolatrous? Or, would he encourage people to buck the system, avoid the hassles and

obey their conscience. To do so would open him up to charges of treason and sedition.

In fact, Luke tells us that in spite of Jesus' response, he was still accused of opposing Caesar's tax: "Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ/Messiah, a king'" (Luke 23:1-4).

This attempt at entrapment is carried out by the Pharisees with the support of the Herodians. This is a truly unholy alliance between two opposing parties who hate one another.

Jesus has to ask if anyone has a coin, suggesting that he does not carry one, and one is produced. The image of Caesar and the words "Son of God" are imprinted on it. To any Jew, the image and the divine claim are a double blasphemy.

Here is thinly disguised hatred, served with a veneer of sugar-coating. A sleight of hand, malice, rage and jealousy cloaked in the syrup of right ordering, law and order, and false humility.

Jesus recognized it for what it is: a trap, a malicious action designed to deceive and silence him.

Jesus takes the question of taxes, and passes it back to the Pharisees and Herodians as a gift, a challenge. He takes the energy of the one setting the trap, and turns it into a force for good for all – throwing their words up in the air to rain down on them as a gossamer thin veil of opportunity and new insight, should they choose to embrace it.

Jesus' journey into Jerusalem threatens the identity of the religious leaders – their history, their existence, their sense of belonging. Unarmed, he is a lethal weapon of destruction in their eyes. How are

they to counter-attack? They use the weapon of words and questions of entrapment to lure Jesus. Jesus in turn uses their power to move forward, turning the questions of right ordering into a cosmic question of deeper belonging and wider identity. He challenges their ultimate loyalty. This catches the Pharisees out: they are 'amazed'. And they leave.

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God”

Caesar has his place and Christians owe an obligation to the state, any state, to live peacefully with their neighbors; to act as responsible citizens, to pay taxes, to vote, to participate. As long as the state does not come into conflict with the higher authority of God. Then we must decide where our ultimate loyalty lies.

Obviously different people have differing opinions on when this rubber hits the road, as witnessed by the fact that many Christians find themselves on opposite sides of interpretation of scripture and can be sincerely “for” or “against” on the same issue.

They tried to paint Jesus into corner that day and the world is *still* trying to paint Jesus into a corner. Although these days it's not so much that we can undermine him and disrupt his movement. It's so that we can co-opt him and add legitimacy to our own opinions.

We see him used by one group to shore up the status quo and keep everyone in line. At the same time there's someone else invoking his name to help tear down some structure and incite some kind of rebellion.

But it's not just Pharisees and Herodians and the world of crazies who are guilty of this. We all are. We are all good at trying to plaster Jesus onto something we're passionate about, especially if it involves allowing us to get out of something we really don't want to do.

We must never interpret this scripture as suggesting Caesar and God are equals. Caesar is a puny human being like us, God is God.

Jesus isn't here to take sides on our agenda or to be a useful pawn as we craft our own way of living in this world -- picking and choosing the parts of secular life we like and the spiritual parts of life we're keen to embrace. He is not here to enable an *à la carte* approach to living where we are only loyal to the things we desire to be and rebel against those which we don't like.

Jesus came to craft a people -- through his life, death and resurrection - - who believe that he is Lord over all things and who, as a result, pursue obedience and beauty in every aspect of life.

Because we know this world -- all parts of it -- do not belong to us or to Caesar. They belong to God, and so we seek not to co-opt him as we craft our own world but honor him within both realms of his .

It will drive us to ask the same old questions: "What is required of me in this relationship? What does faithfulness look like as a citizen? What does love look like in this particular responsibility that I loathe?" We are to be a people who ask those questions even though we know the answers may be uncomfortable.

Loyalty is one way of showing gratitude and in scripture we read over and over again of God's loyalty to his people asking only that they show their gratitude by loyalty to God.

God's loyalty never ceases how loyal are we?