

Homily: Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God: *Matthew 22: 15 - 21*

Jesus says to us today: “Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give back to God what belongs to God”. I’d like to try to unpack that message for us. What was Jesus saying to the people in his time, and how does it apply to us today? What should be our connection between church and state? .

Anyone following the media over this last few weeks would be aware that it has been a tumultuous time in state and federal politics. As Christians, should we stand back or get involved .? Last week in the Australian newspaper a number of our church leaders and some prominent Australians made a submission to have political parties to adopt a more compassionate approach to our dealings with asylum-seekers. On Thursday night, the Gillard government then announced a change in policy. It was not exactly what church leaders had asked for, but clearly their appeal had some impact on government policy. There are many other social issues of concern to us in the church , in the public forum at the moment : the definition of marriage; government policy on euthanasia; filtering of pornography on the Internet; and problematic gambling; Of course within and outside the church, there will be different personal views on whether we in the church should get involved in matters of government or not. There are some people who think there should be a very definite separation between church and state and others who think the church should play a definite role in society. We respect the right of individuals to hold those positions , but it is important we be aware too of the church’ s position .

Similar concerns about the role of church in society, and particularly in government, were present at the time of Jesus. People then didn't like paying taxes, and a carbon tax was not even within their comprehension . The Romans imposed taxes on a range of matters and justified this on the basis of providing for an ordered society, and for infrastructure like roads and aqueducts that serve the common good. Some Jewish people hoped the Jesus would denounce the Roman authorities and help them in a rebellion . The Pharisees just wanted to get rid of Jesus, and hoped that if they could get him to speak out against the Romans, then they would get rid of him . Interestingly he didn't criticise Roman governance . It is clear from Jesus response, not just here, but in other passages , that he saw a role for good government in God’ s plan the lives of people. The same is evident from today's first reading of the prophet Isaiah, where the conquering Persian king Cyrus is regarded as being anointed by God, and providing for the peace and security of the peoples within his kingdom.

It is clear from both the Scriptures and church teaching in our Catechism , that we should be respectful of civil institutions and governments that are providing for the common good. Indeed, the Catechism has lots to say reminding us we have a Christian duty to collaborate with civil authorities to the good of society. More than that, we are encouraged to participate in civil government. I would like to thank all those here that are, or have been, in government or public service. Could you raise your hands please – Thank you for your service of us – you have been exercising diakonia!

In the Australian political system, we have both a right and need to remind our government leaders of our hopes and expectations, particularly in matters of social justice, morals and ethics. On many social matters today , a Christian position is counter cultural . Indeed some people in society hold to positions, quite contrary to ours, and others are actively hostile to us.

10 years ago one of my closest friends, a man by the name of Jim Wallace, resigned from a very successful military career to take up position as chief executive of the Australian Christian Lobby. Jim had been an outstanding serviceman. He had commanded the Special Air Service Regiment, and then all of our special forces, as finally as Brigadier commanded the first Armored Brigade in Darwin. He could easily have gone

on to become the Chief of the Defence Force. But he had become concerned that a unified Christian voice was not being heard by people in government . Instead the noise of many other parties, including those alien to Christian values were being heard and accommodated , and Jim set out to change that lobbying government for the last 10 years on issues of concern to Christians . Three weeks ago on Monday nights ABC question and answer program, QandA, Jim was one of the panel of speakers interviewed by Tony Jones on this matter of church and state. He represented our position well. In the lead up to last year's election. Jim facilitated a television dialogue between the political leaders on their approaches to matters that would've been of concern to Christians in Australian society. Political leaders now pay more attention to Christian voters. Jim has effectively gathered church leaders from across the denominational spectrum and helped present to government, a unified Christian perspective on many matters affecting society. He receives no remuneration for what he does, and has to cope with harassment and even death threats from people who oppose Christian values . He symbolizes the important relationship we must have between church and state, and he has become a front line fighter against the evil that attacks our society from within .

All of us can and should play a part in our civil society. We have a right and obligation to see that our governments, not only deliver good legislation , but do not succumb to the loud voices of dissidents who would seek to introduce legislation that diminishes social justice , or the rights of the poor and powerless. So yes, we should give to Caesar, not just taxes to provide for common services, but also a contribution as individuals and as a church on public policy.

There is a more interesting twist to today's statement of Jesus. He also says: "give back to God what belongs to God." The church cannot be the best contributor for the good of all, without us making contribution to the work that it needs to do. I believe every thing we have is God's gift to us , and what we do with it can be our gift back to God . In the first instance we need to be prepared to give of ourselves through service, by volunteering for various tasks or ministries within the church. But moreover, we need to provide financially for the mission and ministry of the church. This is a matter of conscience, and personal discernment for every one of us here. But there is old saying that " you get what you pay for" . And so it will be for us in this parish and in our diocese. If we would like to see certain areas of ministry life flourish, we will need to put additional financial support towards it.

In the time of Jesus, people were expected to give the first tenth of what they earned in food or in money to works of charity and support of the church. That might seem a lot. Indeed the Romans only asked for one percent of peoples earnings in their tax . But giving 10% is the biblical norm, and it is certainly been the standard by which my family, have supported works of charity and the mission of the church over many years. We have found that in honoring God with a percentage of our income, God has honored us in lots of other ways. We live on quite a small income by comparison with many others, but we have found that God always provides. God loves a generous giver and I encourage everyone here to trust that God will honor whatever you do to promote the Kingdom.

In conclusion, may we both give to Caesar and give to God . Jesus calls us all , to be joyful contributors to the governance of our society, both in utilization of our time, talent and treasure. And he also calls us to confidently give to God and the works of the church in our time, talent and treasure . Both of these are areas of stewardship of the resources God provides for us . Really we are just giving back what God has given to us. As issues present themselves in the public forum, may we also have the courage , like Jim Wallace shows to speak up and be a voice on matters of social justice and social policy. In the words of St Paul today, "May we give the Lord glory and honor, show our faith in action, work for love, and persevere through hope in making our world, the place that God desires it to be".