

Have you studied a bank note recently? Here's one, a £10 note.

Bank notes were originally a representation of something physical of that value: you could take your note to the bank and exchange it, which may well have been for a very odd amount as they were all individually written, for that amount of Gold or Silver. Then over a period of time – from roughly the end of the 1600s until the mid 1900s – these notes changed from individual notes written to a particular person, to a printed note that is written to whoever happens to own it at the time.

But looking at our notes today you see several things – on the back you see a number – to show that it is a unique item – this piece of paper or polymer these days – is worth £10, and if you want another £10 you need a different piece of polymer with a different number, and it also has a picture; at the moment the £10 note has Jane Austin on the back. But the important part is on the front. You have the name of the Bank of England (or it could be one of the Scottish or Northern Irish banks who can issue bank notes), you have a picture of the Queen, and you have the all important line, “I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of ten pounds”.

So how does that compare with a Denarius which was the central item in our gospel reading this morning? Well the silver denarius was a Roman coin. On it would be a picture, normally of the head and shoulders of the ruling emperor, in this case probably Tiberius, it would say who he was – Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus Pontifex Maximus, or it may have the more general term, Divi Filius, meaning son of a God. But for the Jews there are two big issues with this coin: it has a picture of someone who is being made into an idol to be worshipped (in contravention of the second commandment), but also the use of the description Divi Filius is a contravention of the first commandment – you shall have no other Gods before me. Actually the Romans were sensitive to this issue and allowed the Jews to coin their own nonidolatrous copper money for everyday use in addition to, or as an alternative to, the denarius. So, the denarius had so much more significance surrounding it in Jesus' time than our bank notes do today.

Lets now go back to the beginning of the gospel story and see what is going on. Well, the first thing is that we have an alliance between two very unlikely partners. The pharisees, who were very anti-Rome – they objected paying anything to Rome in the form of taxes, and the Herodians, who supported Herod and his line of succession and wanted closer links with Rome. But the one thing they had in common was they both hated Jesus. The Pharisees hated Jesus because he was disrupting their religious agenda; The Herodians hated Jesus because he was upsetting their political agenda. A strange alliance indeed.

But get together they did, and with a rather grovelly approach, they set their trap: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no-one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

And there is the trick – if he says Yes he will be bound to lose some support in the general population as the tax was not only an economic burden but also a hated symbol of lost freedom, but if he says No they will be able to accuse him to Pilate of anti-Roman activity.

But Jesus is no fool: he is getting used to these trick questions and he asks – and here comes the significance of the Denarius - “Show me the coin used for the tax. And they brought him a denarius”.

Got them – they are carrying this coin which they consider to be idolatrous – so immediately Jesus has the upper hand. And then comes Jesus’ two part answer: first, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s”. You live under Roman rule, therefore obey the laws on Roman taxes. But this is not the key point that Jesus is making here. That point is the second part of his answer, “Give to God the things that are God’s”.

So what did Jesus mean by that response, “Give to God the things that are God’s” – and how can we do that today?

The film Chariots of Fire contains the story of one of Scotland’s most famous athletes and Christian missionaries Eric Liddell. Liddell’s fame – according to the film at least – was largely around his refusal, due to his strong beliefs in the sanctity of the Sabbath, to race on a Sunday. The film portrays Liddell finding out whilst he was on the boat across the English Channel on the way to the 1924 Paris Olympics that the heats of his favoured event, the 100 metres, would take place on a Sunday. The truth is that he actually discovered this to be the case several months before the Olympics when the schedules were announced, and made the decision then to drop out of the 100m and compete in the 400m – but this was a race he was nowhere near as good at and so a huge sacrifice. He also dropped out of the two relay events as their finals would be on the Sunday. Despite all this, Eric Liddell won the 400m gold medal.

After the Olympics he continued to race for a while – but the following year he returned to China – he was born there, the son of Scottish Missionaries. He then combined some athletics with serving as a missionary from 1925 to 1943, In 1943 he was interned by the Japanese – but continued his, now, unofficial, work as a missionary in the camp before he died in the camp in 1945 of a brain tumour.

What the film Chariots of Fire brought out was the decisions that Liddell had to make – his belief in the Sabbath meant he could not compromise about competing on a Sunday and he gave up most of his athletics career to serve as a missionary in China. Later, when the rest of his family left China in 1943 when it became unsafe, Liddell remained as that was where he felt God was calling him to be.

“Give to God the things that are God’s.”

Jackie Pullinger graduated from the Royal College of Music having specialized in the oboe. At the age of 22 she wanted to be a missionary, so she wrote to various missionary organizations. Unable to find support, mainly because she was too young in the eyes of the missionary societies, she then sought advice from a minister friend, who advised her that she should buy a ticket for a boat going as far as she could afford and to pray to know when to get off the boat. On the boat she had a dream that impressed upon her the idea of getting off in Hong Kong. However, when she arrived she knew no one there and had only \$10. The only reason the immigration officers allowed her in was because her mother's

godson was a police officer there. She found work as a primary school teacher and also started to teach in the Kowloon Walled City, which in the 1960s was not policed and consequently had become one of the world's largest opium producing centres, run by Chinese criminal Triad gangs. Jackie got to know some of the gang members and leaders, despite the danger, and helped them to find that Jesus can give a purpose and reason for living without having to use drugs. Later she established a youth centre that helped the drug addicts and street sleepers inside the walled city.

In a recent interview she was asked, "What would you say to Christians who want to get closer to God?" Her response was this. "You get more faith when you get more desperate. For instance if you are in a place where a lot of people are hungry then you will need to pray that food is multiplied. If you've got lots in the bank and you've got lots of food you are not likely to learn that lesson that quick. If you are amongst the people and there's no doctor you learn to pray for the sick. So I think we are supposed to be in more uncomfortable places so that we will call upon the Lord. I think that is one of the reasons that he said, 'Go to the poor' because when we go to the poor we realise we are poor; when we go to the poor we realise that we haven't got enough to give them; our own resources of heart or generosity or money or stamina or anything else are gone so quick so I think we are supposed to go to where we run out, and when we run out we get him."

That is what Jackie Pullinger has devoted her life to – and 50 years on she is still working in the walled city of Hong Kong. "Give to God the things that are God's"

But how does that all relate to us? Well, I am not suggesting we all disappear to different parts of the world to either spread the gospel somewhere new or meet the needs of people in far flung places. But I am suggesting that there is a similarity between ourselves and Eric Lidell and Jackie Pullinger – and that is that we are all missionaries. We have a mission to undertake in our villages. What we therefore need to do is to see where this message of "Give to God the things that are God's" fit into our mission, in our villages, in our Benefice?

Consider again what Jackie Pullinger said, "our own resources of heart or generosity or money or stamina or anything else are gone so quick so I think we are supposed to go to where we run out, and when we run out we get him."

So we must go to God, and ask him what it is that we should be giving to him? In our prayers we should ask to be challenged by him as to what we should be giving – I know many of us already feel that we are giving as much of ourselves as we are able – whether that be time or talents or money, but it is always good to review these things from time to time. At the moment there may not be many things that we can physically do in our church life, but praying more is something we can try to do; thinking more about what we as a church can do in 2021 is something we can do now.

But finally, let's join back together the two parts of Jesus' response for a moment. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." Two thousand years ago the people who heard Jesus saying this could fully understand the first part, but the second part was less clear. The Jews would have been brought up with the stories of Moses and the Exodus; of Joshua going into the promised

land; of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha and they would have seen these people as people of God. The vast majority of them didn't quite understand Jesus at the time – the ordinary people listened and then the establishment argued and the meaning of "Give to God the things that are God's" became confused.

But today, the divide between the two parts of Jesus' response is huge. People today understand "Give to the emperor..." – they might not like it but they understand a tax bill, they understand they have to pay VAT, they understand Covid 19 rules.

But, "Give to God the things that are God's" huge numbers of people just don't have an idea about. And we have to put that right. In comparison with other places, the vast majority of people here have enough food to keep them alive; for the vast majority of people, there are medical resources available to them; but the vast majority of people don't even give the living Jesus Christ a thought.

And by seeking the answer for ourselves of the meaning of "Give to God the things that are God's", we can start to tackle how we encourage others to do the same.

Shall we pray.

"And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Heavenly Father we come to you this morning to ask you to show us what you want us to do next as a church, as a benefice, as individuals, so that we know what the things are that we should be giving more of to you, so that we can help those people who don't know you to do the same.

Amen.