

You may find this difficult to believe, but today I have chosen to talk about tax. Generally our Sunday readings are set by the lectionary, but for the next few weeks we are choosing for ourselves. This is because, as you will know if you were here last week, we've launched our Stewardship campaign. (And if you weren't here last week – hey, we've launched our stewardship campaign and there is an envelope for you at the back!) Stewardship is about looking after things: organising, taking care, making sure everything works properly and making sure that whatever is needed is available. In the ordination service for priests, they are described as 'messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord', which is a colossal responsibility when you think about it. Looking after God's world – his household, organising it, taking care of it, making sure it works properly and that whatever it needs is available. That's the commitment that Fr David and Fr Harold and I, and all other clergy, made when we were ordained, so we have to give it our best shot. But we can't do it on our own.

God's household is enormous. It's worldwide, and it isn't confined to the people who have deliberately become members of it. It isn't just churches and cathedrals. It's everything, everywhere, and for everyone. God made Adam and Eve stewards in his garden, and although they were thrown out because they disobeyed him, and then had to live in a far harsher environment, he didn't take away that responsibility. We have inherited it. 'God has no hands on earth but ours', said St Teresa. So our stewardship is about how we do the job of organising and taking care of our bit of God's world.

Fulfilling any responsibility requires three things: people, time and resources. We have some people – we will always welcome more but here you are and here Fr David and I are too. Let's work with what we've got. Then there's time. As Susan said last week: we're lucky to have Fr David all to ourselves. These days many parishes have to share their priest with others. But we don't have him quite all to ourselves. Because he is also Area Dean he helps with the organisation of God's household across Ealing, so we are quite rightly sharing some of what we have. The rest of us juggle work, home, family, education, sport, hobbies and maybe even a bit of 'me time'. It can be difficult to find time for our own relationship with God, and even harder to join in to help maintain his kingdom.

Maintaining the household also needs resources: the skills we have and use in God's service and the facilities, equipment and tools to do this. Which is where I come to taxes. Our gospel reading ends with these very well-known words from Jesus: 'Give therefore to the emperor the things which are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' Which makes it very clear that Jesus recognised that the emperor – in our terms the state, or the government – was entitled to a share in the country's wealth. But not for his personal gain. The emperor was entitled to a share as long as this was used to build a just and fair society, one which provided for the poor, the under-privileged and the outcasts as well as for the more prosperous citizens.

One of my worker-priest colleagues is a tax man. He works in HMRC, with particular responsibility at the moment for making sure the drink and tobacco companies pay the correct tax. Previously he worked on individual taxation, on VAT and fuel duty. He is proud of his job, and he doesn't think it's wrong for a priest to be doing it. He argues that the tax system is the way in which a civilised society ensures that services and benefits are available to everyone who needs them. He points out that John the Baptist told tax-collectors to 'collect no more than the amount prescribed for you', that Jesus called Matthew the tax collector to be a disciple, and that he ate with Zaccheus, another tax collector who gave back what he had extorted. He knows that by paying fair taxes we are contributing directly to the

fair and just society that is part of God's household, providing that the government uses the money wisely.

We may not approve of everything the government does with our money, and it is our responsibility to hold the government to account. As a Quaker and a pacifist my father-in-law strongly objected to any of his tax money being used for military purposes. He was not allowed to pay less tax. Instead he gave money to charity, carefully calculating how much the government would have to repay in gift aid so that it was the same as the proportion of his tax that went on defence spending. It cost him more, but he was true to his principles.

However, our taxes don't pay for specific religious activities, whether Christian, Hindu, Muslim or any other. Here in north Ealing we organise and care for our segment of God's kingdom. We maintain a beautiful building that is open for everyone to use and enjoy. Our hall hosts a nursery school, local clubs and parties. We hold a weekly café and conversation for anyone in the local community. We contribute to the foodbank and support the winter night shelter. At a more personal level we give individual support to people at all stages of life and especially at times of difficulty. We baptise, we marry and we take funerals, spending time with each of the families involved. As well as our time, this all costs money: for heating, lighting and maintenance, for the vicar's stipend and the vicarage, for our administrator and the parish office, for a contribution towards the costs of the wider church, and to help parishes less fortunate than we are. And when we meet, week by week, to worship God who has given us all that we are and everything that we have, we do so in comfort, rejoicing in the music, the flowers, the sound system, the candles and incense – and even the service sheets! All these things cost money and all of them get more expensive, year by year.

Our taxes are our contribution, as responsible citizens, to the fair society which is part of God's kingdom. Our stewardship money is our contribution to a healthy, lively church community which brings people together in fellowship and reaches out to support each other and our neighbours, to spread the good news of the kingdom and bring more people to walk with Christ. Render unto Caesar, certainly, and render unto God with joy and thanksgiving!