

Homily 29th Sunday 22/10/17

In today's gospel – 'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesars.... Jesus implies that we should obey the civil authorities. This gospel also reminds me of the time I first entered seminary in 1970, and we studied moral theology from a 1930s book written by Genico. He was very interesting when it came to theft – about which more later. Basically Genico starts off by saying that taxes are punitive. In other words someone in authority is taking your money off you, to use admittedly, for the State. You have to remember that Genico lived through the early 20th century, when in many countries there was no representation of the people – many countries were absolute monarchies - but there was taxation. In Genico therefore, there's an ambivalence about paying taxes. He gives an example to highlight the difference between honesty and theft. Genico puts the case that if you make a small mistake on your tax return, or the taxman gives you a refund that you were not due, he says it all depends on the amount. He says if it's a small amount, don't worry about it. You could justify this by saying it would cost them more to reassess your tax liability, or indeed you could view it as a little money due to you – and indeed everyone – from the money wasted by the State. However a larger amount should always be repaid.

However I think that Genico's attitude represents a real moral dilemma for all of us – there's no overriding sense of the common good – the idea that honest payment of tax benefits us all, eg the provision of schools and hospitals etc.

When we turn to St Paul, he echoes the teaching of Jesus that we should obey the Civil Authorities – to stand above the rest of society. As people who are proclaiming Christ we should be honest and open in our dealings with each other, and especially in our duties towards the Civil Authorities. Jesus did not come into the world solely to overturn society's structures – although He did challenge unjust

structures. The message of Jesus is always about a change in our own hearts, a change in our own perceptions of right and wrong, and above all a genuine concern for the common good of everyone. We should support structures that are for the good of society- because Jesus knew that even under Caesar, taxes were used for a variety of necessary things.

At the end of the day too, we should ask ourselves if I choose to be civilly disobedient, is it right that I should be? There are those people who choose to make a stand on various issues. A priest I knew was vehemently opposed to the 'Poll Tax,' and was willing to go to prison for withholding payment – however he was thwarted in this when his sister, unknown to him, paid it for him – he was not best pleased! There has to be a very serious reason for civil disobedience or withholding tax – something really unjust that we have to protest about. I would suggest to you that the teaching of Jesus and St Paul states that we should obey the civil authorities in all that is in accord with our conscience, and that tax should be paid – in full. We should strive to be honest, and desire to serve the common good of society. We should want to see society structured, safe and secure for everyone. Equally, we should give God His rightful place in society and in our own lives, thus ensuring that in all things we conform to, and faithfully mirror, the life and example of Jesus Christ.