

were to say that the tax should be paid, he would at once lose all credibility with the people; on the other hand, if he were to say it should not, he could then be accused of fomenting disobedience, even rebellion, against Rome, and that could have – literally – fatal consequences.

You can imagine the tension in the crowd as Jesus calmly holds up one of the well-known silver coins used for paying the tax and asks, “Whose head is this? Whose name?” Well, everyone knows the answer to those questions: the head and the name are of course “Caesar’s” (the Roman emperor’s). “Very well,” says Jesus, “give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.” By having such coinage in their possession, they were at least implicitly acknowledging Caesar’s right to tax them.

## Application

However, Jesus’ answer is more than an ingenious way of slipping out of a trap. By adding that what belongs to God ought to go back to God, he’s making a further point: that our overriding commitment has to be to God. Of course we must accept lawful civil authority; indeed as Christians we are called to be the best of citizens. Being good, responsible citizens, working for the common good of the community, these are our Christian duty – in that sense, already part of our giving to God what belongs to God. At the same time we do not look to the State as our moral guide: the law may countenance abortion, for example, or the sale of arms to oppressive regimes; but the fact that such activities are legal does not make them morally right. And if ever there were a genuine clash between our duties to the State and our duties to God, there is no doubt where our Christian duty lies. It is God’s law, not the State’s, that has the last word.

Today, let us remember in our prayers all who face this stark choice: that they may courageously follow conscience, no matter what price they have to pay.