

18 October Homily

I received an email from my accountant the other day reminding me about submitting a tax return. While my income as a priest is relatively low, I still like to do things by the book. They say that two things are guaranteed in life – death and taxes! For wage and salary earners who work hard, a significant amount of tax departs from their pay packet to the government. In order to live in a civilised society, we pay tax for schools, roads, hospitals and other vital government services. There is YouTube footage of the late Australian businessman Kerry Packer, known as a tough operator, appearing before a parliamentary enquiry about business and tax matters. While tax avoidance is illegal, Packer made the point that tax minimisation was perfectly legal. He then stated ‘anybody who doesn’t minimise their tax ought to have their heads read, because as a government I can tell you you’re not spending it that well that we should be donating extra!’

Today’s Gospel is one of those wonderful scenes that we can actually visualise. The Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus with a trick question about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Jesus asks for the coin and when he asks whose head and whose name appears on the coin, they answer ‘Caesar’. Jesus makes it clear that his disciples have one obligation to civil society and another obligation to God and that these two realms ought not be in conflict with each other. This Gospel passage has been the source of much debate over the centuries about the relationship between the Church and civil society and what freedoms churches should have without too much state interference. In the Middle Ages, the Church was in effect the civil society in Europe and sadly, that power was abused. Sometimes in class, students are shocked to learn that some popes, bishops and cardinals used their office, not for the pastoral care of God’s people, but to protect the political and financial power of their families.

Thank goodness that bit of history is in the past. Today, the Church is in the business of the Gospel, of bringing the Good News of Jesus to our world. We also in the business of humble service and Christian witness. We take our place in society, pay the taxes we are required to pay, and seek to make a contribution to the common of all. We live in an era of diverse cultures and religious backgrounds, including those of no

religious background whatsoever. People's rights must be respected even though we might not agree with them in order for society to function properly.

In today's second reading, St Paul reminds us what is required for a faith community to function properly. Here is Paul praising the Thessalonians for their faith in action and he is recognising how they worked for love and how they persevered through hope. Paul recognises not just talk and lots of words but the power of the Holy Spirit at work in that community. I hope that St Paul would say the same thing if he were to visit us today. Please God he would recognise that this is a community and place of prayer, a place where the word of Jesus is proclaimed as a word of hope. A place that welcomes the stranger, a place where people feel at home, a place that recognises the diversity of its members and their gifts, a place where a person's wealth or education makes no difference whatsoever to who belongs. This is discipleship today. This is the Gospel, the good news at work in our lives. This is what Paul literally spent his whole life doing, building up local communities in faith, building up the Body of Christ, deepening within all members what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Since the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, society has neatly divided the world into the political and spiritual realm, and emphasised the separation of church and state as if we live in two different planets. During the week, I was amazed to see the international media coverage of Pope Leo facing surgery. Naturally, it is a major news story for Catholic media outlets but even in the wider secular media, it appeared that there was genuine concern for the pope and his surgical procedure. The world recognises and respects his moral voice, his calls for peace, his remarkable comments on the challenges of AI and digital technology. The world sees him as a messenger, a disciple, a moral voice for peace. As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we deepen our call as disciples of Jesus and renew our commitment as witnesses in wider society. Like Paul, we are called to put our faith into action, to work for love and to persevere in hope. Here at the Lord's table we encounter those gifts of faith, love and hope. We take up the gifts of bread and wine and the Holy Spirit is at work transforming these gifts and our lives into the sacrament of faith, hope and love for a sometimes broken and fragile world.