

And now for something completely different. For a particular generation the response to anything related to Monty Python's Flying Circus is Pavlovian. Just start to say 'this parrot is no more' and someone will complete the phrase. Or 'he's not the Messiah'. Or 'you were lucky'. The list could go on and on *ad nauseum*, and it often does, ever spreading ripples of humour ever further from funny the more distant they are from the original source. A whole generation's humour has, for better or worse, been defined by the Pythons. My own favourite part of the Monty Python legacy is nothing to do with dead parrots, nudge nudge, wink wink or the Spanish Inquisition. It is a little known blink-and-you've-missed-it caption introducing a little sketch in their last film. On to the silver screen, in cinemas around the world, in metre high or more letters came the immortal legend 'The Third World: Yorkshire.'

Yorkshire, land of my birth. Those romantic windswept Wuthering Heights moors. The sweeping, chiselled by God's hand Captain Cook coast line. Dry stone walled dales, imposing rain-carved crags, picturesque mill towns. That proud and jealously guarded tradition of cultural backwardness. Plain talking which is in fact barefaced rudeness with flat vowels. Tea you can stand your spoon up in, though the end might have dissolved off when you come to remove it. Fish and chips fried in beef dripping. Sandwiches filled with beef dripping. Chest rubs made of... ok you get that picture. Flat caps. Whippets. Lardy cake. And sticks. Like primitive cultures everywhere, Northern life places great value on sticks. Useful things. Obviously, you can beat your children with them, a proud local custom, fading in the cities but still practised in more isolated rural pockets. You can make a fire if the coal runs out. You can exercise the dog with one, though obviously not a good one as that would be a right waste of a decent stick. You can have hours of fun with the occupation known as 'whittling' which is basically hacking away at a stick with a penknife until there's nothing left. But then there's nowt much else to do while waiting for your ferret to come out of t'rabbit hole.

Yorkshire loves its sticks. And we share with our southern, western, eastern cousins, in fact all that big, joyful human family, the favourite stick-based pastime of humankind: getting the wrong end.

Oh how we love that end of the stick. Show someone a stick, one end covered in dubious brown muck, the other nicely polished and a clearly legible inscription 'this is the right end' and see them lunge for the clearly dodgy sticky end and grip like a bull terrier who's found the last bone on earth. Once we have that tasty, chewy, and wrong end of the stick firmly in our jaws, it is very difficult indeed for us to let go.

We will tenaciously grip that stick long past the point that is clearly not in our best interests to do so, long past the point when we realise that what has given that end of the stick its characteristic and wrong end stickiness does not in fact bear thinking about. We will keep barking up the wrong tree, maintaining the peak level of ferocious yapping even when it becomes clear that not only is it the wrong tree, but we are also in the wrong wood and directing our best intimidating noises at a lamp post. The wrong end of the stick and the wrong tree. Welcome to humanity.

This is, I know, a long prelude to the 'now he's going to talk about the Gospel' bit, but then I do want to keep your attention as long as I can *and* it certainly is important because the most common way we have treated this morning's gospel through two thousand years of the faith is to treat it as if it were a stick and to lunge automatically for the wrong end of it.

Should we pay taxes to an occupying force? ask Jesus' questioners. Wow. Heavy question for a Sunday morning and an even more charged one that it might first appear. This was not simply a question of politics: occupy Jerusalem, stomp your big oppressive boots over the holy city and it becomes an always-explosive question of not politics but religion. That in fact is how the question is phrased. 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?' Now, as on one level, Caesar and his bully boys *are* the law in 1st century Palestine that is a non-question. But this is not the level of our debate. The question is: it against *God's* law to pay the Roman taxes?

It's a slippery question. And Jesus neatly sidesteps the carefully placed banana skin. His answer is as elegant as it is eloquent;

*'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'*

So that's straightforward enough then. Keep religion out of politics and politics out of religion. It's pretty clear. But is it? The elegant simplicity of Jesus' answer is deceptive. It is an answer whose meaning depends largely on who is hearing it.

But before we grapple with that answer a bit more, let us consider the visual aid Jesus used to illustrate his answer. A coin. Now the thing about money, the thing that makes it money and not jewellery or bullion is that it is intrinsically worthless. And not just the pound after Brexit. Even before we voted for economic suicide a pound coin had next to no *real* value, a £50 note less so. Money has no value *except* that

which we give it. Money, the motor that makes the world goes round, the desire of which is the source of all evil; money, money, money is a confidence trick. In these post-banking crisis days, we are acutely aware as we rarely are that money is all smoke and mirrors.

And as with the example Jesus chooses, so it is with all the things of Caesar. Adolf Hitler wondered that a tiny island could have an empire that covered a 1/4 of the globe held under the imperial yolk by a handful of soldiers. A confidence trick. All empires depend just as much on the mesmerised acquiescence of their subjects as on the brawn of their military thugs. Any empire relies on making you think that it is the natural ruler, that all these soldiers in your country *are really* there to keep the peace, that the world really *should* belong to us, it is simply the way it should be. Thirty per cent strong arm thuggery, seventy per cent confidence trick.

So much for the visual aid. What about the answer? '*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's.*' Go along with the ways of the world. Here is the end of the stick we always grab and it is the wrong end. So many times has this answer been wheeled out to allow Christians to acquiesce in activities which are so far from promoting the Kingdom of God that they are actively acting against it. So often we have taken it to mean a green light for us to enthusiastically accept the temptation of Satan that Jesus refused: bow down before me and all this will be yours.

Is this still a live question you may ask? After all, the capitalist world we inhabit is no longer a world of throne-bound kings and emperors lording it over their subjects. Well yes, this is a live question: Caesar may be dead, but instead we have an even more ruthless tyrant dictating our lives- that rather innocuous looking visual aid for Jesus' answer: money. Forget women bishops, boys in dresses and equal marriage. They are no threat to a Christian at all. In any way shape or form. But this is.

So, give to the emperor what is the emperor's, give to God what is God's. The import of and the answer to this question pivots on another question: what is there in the world that is not God's?

What is owing to the emperor of illusion, the ruler constructed of smoke and mirrors, what is owing to a confidence trick? And what is owing to God?

The answer to those questions and how that plays out in any individual life is really very much down to you; but take care, the consequences of your answer are mind-

boggling. So what will you give to the emperor? What is his due? And what will you give to God?

We all know what the answer *should* be, what the 'right' answer is. But what does your life, lived right now, say your answer is?