

When we read gospel passages like today's, it's hard not to conclude that Jesus was interested in political authority or the power that supported it. He always spoke to the inner person, to the heart. His teachings were for the soul. To us, today, in the world we live in, it might be difficult to understand why Jesus didn't speak against the social injustices of the day, the state policies that created them, or the crushing oppression of the Roman occupiers. But the fact is, he didn't. The question about tax was designed to trap him: because if he said that yes, they should pay tax to Rome, the people would have turned against him; and if he had said no, they shouldn't, the authorities would have arrested him. What he very astutely says is: 'The question doesn't interest me.'

He also dined with tax-collectors, who were despised because they were paid to collect taxes on behalf of Rome.

What he draws people's attention to again and again, is the reality of the kingdom that has nothing to do with the kingdoms and empires of this world. According to the gospel of Luke, these have been given to Satan (4:6). Jesus did not engage with these kingdoms and empires or their representatives. Often, like before Herod, he was silent.

This was something even his closest disciples did not understand: they expected Jesus to be a political messiah, a liberator of God's people who would throw off the yoke of Caesar and Rome. This is why his trial and crucifixion came as such a catastrophic shock to them.

However, Jesus was very much interested in *religious* bondage and *spiritual* oppression. His angry sorrow was directed against the scribes and Pharisees, whose hypocrisy was unbearable to him. In Matthew's gospel he says:

"For they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to help them."

And to their faces he says:

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”

To avoid the seduction of hypocrisy – which is thinking that we're better, holier, more loveable and faithful than everyone else, we need to do what the prophet Micah tells us:

‘Live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.’
(Micah 6:8).

This is one of the most lovely distillations of how to be in this world yet not of it: to live justly in the midst of injustice and inequality, to love tenderly in a society hallmarked by moral indifference, and to walk humbly with our God among the strident screams of militant materialism.