



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Feast of Saint Matthew (21st September) 2026

For almost as long as there has been a version of organised human society, issues of taxation have never been far from the surface of political debate. Indeed, most political debate is related to questions of taxation in one way or another; and they have been integral to many of the great societal shifts: such as in the *Magna Carta* or in the cry of, "No taxation without representation," of the American Revolution.

Today, in our own land and across much of Europe and the United States, the question of taxation is front and centre in public discourse as we grapple with the challenges of a changing world and the continuing outfall of the financial crisis and the pandemic.

Questions about taxation fall into one of two overarching categories.

First, we must decide what it is that we wish so-called public money to fund. The range of possibilities is endless and although we can divide them into categories of defence, welfare, infrastructure and so on; in fact, all these things can be connected. In many ways the fiscal choices we make, say something about the society we aspire to be: an equally, the society we aspire to be determines how we spend that public money.

The other class of question is how you are going to pay for it all - usually, who is going to pay for it. Whatever the philosophy of the past, today we see public expenditure as shared costs, which need to be paid from the wealth, which together we have generated, since it is vanishingly rare for someone to be able accurately to claim that they have made their money all by themselves; and usually, the panoply of societal structures provided by the state enables each of us to earn a living.

Questions both of how to spend money and from whom it should be exacted are complex - even intricate - matters; and the law of unintended consequences lurks around the choices that have to be made. When we vote for a set of policies, we are choosing between broad brushstroke outlines of proposals: it would be impossible for whole populations to consider programmes in all their details: and yet it is often these very details that can prove a disappointment as politicians translate promises into action.

One of the influences on our politicians as they craft the public finances is what we might call the mood-music of the nation. This is, perhaps, crystallised at the time of an election; but continues to play between these punctuating moments and can change in tone very quickly.

Christians are part of the choir from which this mood music emanates. We have a philosophy - what we call the Gospel - which guides our conception of what a good society would look like. It is intrinsic to Christian discipleship that we look for more out of earthly life than our narrow self-interest; and at the same time recognising that we are called to be responsible stewards of those things with which God has entrusted us, including our personal resources along with the influence that we can exercise.

None of this, of course, can translate in a straightforward way into particular policies; and, indeed, even if it could, the realities of earthly life would make it unlikely that they could be implemented in a pristine way.

Never-the-less, in a careful and considered way, we must reflect on how, as Christian people we contribute to the debate on what sort of society we should aspire to be and how we should pay for it.