

Reflection for the Twenty Third Sunday of the Church's Year

“Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.” You may be surprised to learn that these words encouraging us to pay out taxes are the words from St Paul’s letter to the Romans immediately preceding the key words which are the take-away phrase from today’s scriptures: *“owe no one anything, except to love each other.”* St Paul’s words remind us that, just as paying tax to a legitimate authority is something owed, a responsibility upon us, so loving each other is also something owed, a responsibility that we have. Love creates ties and bonds which in turn lead to duties and obligations. Those who fall in love and commit themselves to one another enter into duties and obligations arising out of their mutual love. Parents who bring children into the world owe those children unconditional love and in return, children, unconditionally loved by their parents, owe to them love and care in return. We don’t often think of love as something owed, as a duty or obligation but St Paul today makes it clear that it is.

It is through this lens of love as something owed that we ought to view our diverse readings today. Starting with the prophet Ezekiel who has been *“made a watchman for the house of Israel.”* He is sent *“to the wicked”* because God, in his infinite love, does not wish to give up on them but wants to turn them away from their wrongdoing. He lays on Ezekiel a duty or obligation, which he must undertake with a loving heart, to fearlessly take God’s message to the wicked and to call upon them to turn from their ways. Ezekiel is warned not to neglect this errand of love even if he is unsuccessful.

Turning to the gospel, which reflects the time of a settled Christian community, Jesus spells out the love that his disciples must show to an errant *“brother who sins against”* them. Ties and bonds as part of the community exist even with an errant brother and so members of the community have a duty to gently and charitably try to bring that brother back into fellowship. Firstly, by a private approach and, if that fails, they must try *“with one or two others”*. And if that fails, they should involve the whole *“church.”* Only after the disciples have so extensively sought to maintain the bonds of fellowship and mutual love and failed should they treat the errant brother as *“a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

Our scriptures are very diverse today, but we can interpret all of them through those very important and significant words of St Paul, *“owe no one anything, except to love each other.”* We should also take these words away with us and apply them to our own lives.