

WHOSE IMAGE?

Pentecost 20 Year A

Ex. 33:12-23; Ps. 99; 1 Thes. 1:1-10; Mt. 22:15-22

Gladstone 18/10/2020

A few weeks ago, I spent a lot of time sorting through pay slips, dockets, bank accounts, separating business related expenses from personal expenses. Many of you will probably have been doing the same—and if you haven't yet, then you had better hurry up. Why? I'm sure you all know. It's tax time! And the reason we go through all this effort is that at the end of the day there is some faint hope that if we've done our homework and the accountant has done his, the government will be kind enough to give us back some of that precious tax that they take out of our wages every week, or fortnight or month. You know, they say that there are only two things in life of which you can be absolutely sure—death and taxes—and scientists are already working on the former. Taxes, I fear, will be with us forever.

We all probably agree that taxes are a necessary part of life, but in all truth, we do our darndest not to have to give the government a cent more than what they are entitled to, according to the law. This is not a new problem—it's been around for as long as humankind has had governments. And I suppose, governments, too, have their place in society, as long as we don't take them too seriously. Someone has to organise the garbage collection, build roads, clean up flood damage, and of course, we do need the police from time to time. And I suppose we have to support our government financially through our taxes so that it can carry out these important tasks, for which we are all, no doubt, grateful.

But as the American writer, P.J. O'Rourke once said, "Giving money and power to governments is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."

Given humankind's preoccupation for civil complaint in the area of government and taxes, we should not be too surprised that somewhere in Jesus' ministry there would be some discussion about taxes and government.

In this morning's gospel reading from Matthew's account, we find the Pharisees and the Herodians plotting together to trick Jesus through a question related to the payment of taxes. The fact that these two groups were working together on this project is, in itself, quite amazing. The Pharisees and the Herodians, you see, were sworn enemies. The Pharisees along with the Zealots were totally opposed to Roman rule in their homeland.

While the Zealots were inclined to violence, the Pharisees were a bit more realistic about the power of Roman legions. Therefore their “sedition”, if you’d like to call it that, was of a passive nature. They co-operated with Roman rule only to the extent that they absolutely had to.

The Herodians, on the other hand, were whole-hearted supporters of co-operation with Rome. Co-operation brought benefits—good wages, high positions in government—opposition would only bring destruction (as, in fact, it eventually did when the Zealots got their way). To the Pharisees, the Herodians were traitors—they had sold out their birth-right. To the Herodians, the Pharisees were religious idealists, living in past glory. So, for them to get together against Jesus, and on a subject upon which they disagreed, they must have been pretty keen to trap Jesus—or pretty desperate.

Taxes, and how they are used, have always been a sensitive issue. The Pharisees and the Herodians are acutely aware of this when they approach Jesus with the question “Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” It’s a little bit like the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” It is what is called, in the industry, a loaded question. It doesn’t matter how you answer, you’re going to get yourself into a lot of trouble. So, they figure they have him either way. Either a yes or a no answer will get Jesus into trouble. If he says “no”, they have grounds to accuse him of sedition before the Roman procurator and he could be arrested. On the other hand, a “yes” answer will make him unpopular with the people, who find the Roman tax religiously offensive and financially burdensome. Jesus, however, refuses to give a yes or no answer. Instead, he calls for a denarius and asks whose image and inscription it carries. Hearing that it is Caesar’s, he says, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Many have understood this passage as a determinate for a theology of the separation of Church and State. That is, give to the State (or the government, or Caesar) what belongs to the State, and give to God that which belongs to God. As if the two can be separated. But then we are left with the question: How do you sort out what belongs to the state and what belongs to God?

To see this passage only in this light is to miss the point of what Jesus is trying to say. The question that the Pharisees and Herodians put to Jesus was not, after all, a sincere question posed by people who really wanted to know the truth about church-state

relations, or indeed about the payment of taxes. They were trying to trick him so that he would either be arrested by the authorities or made unpopular with the people—a kind of win-win situation for them, either way. It would, therefore, be wrong to treat the saying as a positive teaching of Jesus on the ideal relationship that should exist between church and state or whether or not we should pay taxes. Rather, faced with the double-sided trap of the Pharisees and Herodians in which it was unsafe to say yes or no, Jesus framed the truth in such paradoxical language that it would be hard to pin him down exactly.

When we look a little more closely into the passage, we notice a couple of important points. First, when Jesus asks for the coin (and one is promptly produced), he exposes the hypocrisy of his questioners. Images held great significance to the Jewish people. One of the reasons that Roman coinage was so offensive to Jews was that it contained the graven image of someone who considered himself divine. The coin that Jesus was given had a portrait of Tiberius on the one side, and a picture of him seated on his throne on the other. The inscription declared Tiberius to be “maxim pontiff”, which means, “great ruler”. It was not only a declaration that Tiberius was emperor, but that he was a god.

Any Jew, therefore, who was sensitive to the demands of the Mosaic Law would not be carrying a coin embossed with the image of an emperor pictured as divine. The bearer of such a “graven image” has already settled for himself the question of how to relate to the Roman empire and its economy.

Second, Jesus’ question about whose “image” the coin carries contains an allusion that most of us miss. An image on something indicates authority and ownership. If the image of Tiberius determines what belongs to Tiberius, then we need to ask ourselves what it is that determines that which belongs to God? Again, it is an image. Whatever bears the image of God belongs to God and should be given to God. Jews, especially, knew that human beings are created in the image of God. A small coin may bear the image of Caesar, but you and I bear the image of God. As such we belong to God, totally and completely.

Jesus’ response, therefore, is not a clever dodge. It’s a confrontation. You see, the world is not divided into one part (however large) for God and one part (however small) for

Caesar. All creation is, first of all, under God's sovereignty, especially human beings, who as the bearers of God's image, have a special role in being stewards of creation. It is within that context, then, that a person is able to work out the smaller question of relating to the empire.

Jesus' challenge to his adversaries, then, is that in refusing to deal with the truth, as it was displayed in the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus, they are resisting the reign of God in their lives and in their hearts. This is because they are failing to live out their roles as bearers of God's image. They are failing to give themselves to God, wholly and completely. In their resistance to Jesus they had rebelled against the very kingdom of God which they thought they were defending.

When the Hebrew people, fresh out of Egypt, sought to create for themselves a graven image, as we heard last week, God's anger burned against them. Only through the sincere and passionate intercession of Moses, did God stay his hand from destroying all the people.

Graven images abound in our society. You see them on money and clothing and food products. They appear in advertisements and on license plates and tools. You also see them in our work, in our interests, in our passions. But for God there is no graven image. There is only you and me. The emperor may have his coins, but God has us. We know that regardless of whose image is on the coin temporarily, even the coin ultimately belongs to God. What we do with the coin, therefore, is not governed by the emperor alone or the government, in our case, but by God. Whether we pay taxes or not does not depend on our relationship with the government, but on our relationship with God.

Only when we have the same passionate desire to know the presence of God in our lives for which Moses yearned on the mountain, shall we know what it is like to place God first in our lives. Only when we seek to stand in the presence of God, the way Moses did, will we be able to live out in our own lives what it means to be bearers of God's image and give to God all that belongs to God—our very life and being.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.