

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 24
Year A

I strongly suspect that even a casual familiarity with any of today's various sources of streaming news would absolutely satiate anyone's interest in Caesar and Caesar's taxes — but here they are again. Still, Jesus is being quite non-partisan here, and, although frequently misunderstood, this little story has much to say to any age, including our own.

The question of the Pharisees and the Herodians, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" didn't trap Jesus. But it has trapped countless others. It has been used as a blanket statement of Christian political obligation — a quick and easy answer to any questions or qualms the dictates of a government may engender. Jesus' statement about rendering to Caesar, of giving to the Emperor, has been used as a general rule that can answer any number of specific questions. Actually, it's just the opposite. It's a brilliant answer to one very specific question. But it also raises all sorts of general questions about God and Caesar — and only hints at a way to answer them.

Look at the story itself. Two important political groups in Jerusalem — the Pharisees and the Herodians — are ganging up on Jesus. It's a strange partnership; the two groups didn't like each other at all. First are the Herodians; they were supporters of Herod, the puppet King of Israel who was nothing more than a Roman lackey. Herodians would have a great investment in obeying Roman laws and paying Roman taxes. Then we have the Pharisees, who, as religious purists, would object strongly to paying taxes to any pagan king and especially to a king who, like Caesar, claimed to be of divine lineage.

At the same time, the crowds, who were watching the debate, also had a stake in this. They didn't like either the Romans or their taxes, and they frequently showed their dislike by rioting. They would be very unhappy at any answer that seemed to approve of the taxes.

Next, there are the soldiers, who were watching the crowds. They were Romans who were paid by the taxes in question. They didn't much like the crowds, who had a penchant for rioting and whose rioting they had to control. Finally, it was Passover time — the most likely time of the year for a good riot about religion, the emperor, Rome in general, and Roman taxes in particular.

In other words, this was not an abstract debate about either political philosophy in general or the relationship between Church and state. It was a perfect set-up, a very clever trap. The intent of the question was to ensure that Jesus was either arrested for treason by the Romans, discredited as a false teacher by the Pharisees, finked out by the Herodians, or lynched by the crowd as a traitor to his own people.

On one level, Jesus slipped out of the trap on a technicality. He asked for a coin (notice that Jesus doesn't have one, but the Pharisees do). It's a special minting of the denarius. On the coin is marked, "Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of divine Augustus, High Priest". Below these words, the image of the emperor is pressed into the metal. To any good Jew, the coin itself was an abomination. It violated the first commandment by claiming that Caesar had divine pretensions, and it violated the second commandment by containing an image of this false god.

A big part of what Jesus said was simply “give the cursed thing back.” It could belong to no one but Caesar; it could certainly not belong to anyone who worshiped the God of Israel.

This answer was a brilliant counter stroke by Jesus. It avoided the trap, and it allowed that particular tax to be paid with that particular coin — not as an act of political submission, but as a sign of religious fidelity. It was a very specific, and very narrow answer that made it possible for Jesus both to escape the trap and to preach a bit.

But this answer, good as it is, doesn’t directly address the broader questions. Clearly, that coin belonged to Caesar — but what else does? No doubt some things belong to God, but what are those things, and how does one decide? Until we begin to get clear on these questions, what Jesus had to say about that one Roman coin is not much help for us as we make decisions about possible conflicts of loyalty, obligation, or actions involving the claims of the government and the claims of God.

Although Jesus is neither giving a theory about the relationship of religious people to their government nor making a simple division of life into two neat and distinct parts — this is Caesar’s, this is God’s — He is, on a much deeper level, doing something subtler, something more profound.

Remember, that coin belonged to Caesar because it was stamped with Caesar’s image (the Greek word here for “image” is εικῶν or eikōn) and marked with Caesar’s inscription. The coin was made by the emperor for the emperor’s purposes. All that is a pretty good claim to ownership — a claim that Jesus recognized, at least for that coin.

The next question that naturally flows from Jesus’ words is: “What, then, belongs to God?” Well, what is made in the image of God? What is stamped in the likeness of God and created for God’s purposes? Do you see where he’s going here?

Our central definitive characteristic, what it is that makes us human beings, is that we are created in the image of God. And what’s more, at our baptism we are further marked, we are stamped, we are inscribed, with the sign of the cross. Our image and likeness, and what is written upon us, is that of God himself. To whom, then, do we belong? To whom are we to render, to surrender, ourselves?

This, the question of our ultimate loyalty and our deepest allegiances, is what Jesus is really talking about as he deals with the plots and the traps of his enemies. The Lord is saying simply that what belongs to God is nothing other than we ourselves. There is no higher claim upon us, and there can be no higher claim upon us. Our lives are God’s, and all that we do is to be marked by that conviction. All competing claims for our lives and for our allegiance are to be evaluated and understood in the light of whose we are, and whose image we bear.

Alas, all of this does not provide us any easy answers when we face problems with a particular moral or political question. It does not automatically tell us who to vote for, or what policy to support, or which course of action is best regarding energy, taxes, the economy, or our current and future wars. Problems like these will continue to be difficult and ambiguous, and that difficulty and that ambiguity will not change if we toss these few verses from Matthew, or from anywhere else, at them. Still, what Jesus said to the Pharisees and the Herodians can provide us a very good place to start.

Give to God what is God's — for God owns that which He has made in his image, and He is Lord over that which bears His inscription. It is that image, in ourselves and in others, that leads to concrete imperatives for justice, compassion, and righteousness.

It is that image that both claims our allegiance and directs our efforts. It is God's image that gives ultimate value and meaning to what we do. It is that image, and no other, which gives us the assurance that something lasting, something permanently worthwhile, is being formed at the core of our personal histories, and at the heart of this broken and yet redeemed world. That, at least, is where we begin.

Certainly, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's — but give to God the things that are God's.

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