

Matthew 22:15-22

Made in God's image

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel reading has a classic example of the old saying 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Politically, just about the only thing the Pharisees and the Herodians have in common is that they don't like Jesus. No one would have expected them to come together to challenge Jesus on the issue of taxation. The Pharisees opposed the Roman Empire and its rule over God's promised land, and the Herodians support King Herod of Judea, who had Jewish ancestry, but simply acted as a puppet of the Roman Emperor. For the Pharisees, the Herodians represented the worst behaviour for a Jewish person, mixing with and working with Gentiles. For the Herodians, the Pharisees represented the biggest challenge to their power and authority, pushing for independence and the removal of Gentile influence on the promised land of God's chosen people.

But here they have joined forces, firstly offering false praise of Jesus before posing a question. The question was meant to offer Jesus no alternative but to either defy Caesar, which was always dangerous, or offend those who were resisting Roman rule, which probably included most of his followers. It was very much a loaded question meant to trap him. From a Roman legal perspective, no one could avoid paying taxes. It was the law of the land, and the penalties for avoiding it were harsh. So, in one sense, the question asked of Jesus was meaningless. Of course you had to pay taxes.

But these taxes were also part of Rome's mechanism for subjugating the residents of its far-flung empire. The taxation system was as much an occupying force as were the actual legions of soldiers. Both the Herodians and the Pharisees knew full well the consequences of defying the Roman Empire. The Pharisees had been making deals with Rome even as they were opposed to its rule. And while the Herodians supported Rome's puppet king in Judea and enjoyed the power that came with that, they did not always share Rome's political agenda. It was indeed pure hypocrisy for both parties to ask Jesus such a question, and he straight up calls them out on that. "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

Jesus wasn't about to get sucked into some sort of political game, as if he was seeking earthly authority. When things later came to a head and Jesus was brought before Pilate, he clearly says, "My kingdom is not of this world." For Jesus and his followers, the issue of dealing with earthly authorities was much more complicated than simply condoning the sometimes brutal Roman Empire, or engaging in outright rebellion against the empire.

One factor that becomes apparent in the exchange is that what is legal is not necessarily what is moral. What was lawful from Rome's perspective might not be acceptable to God. And Jesus asking them for one of the coins used to pay the Roman tax brings this issue into the open. The coins bear the image of Tiberius Caesar and the inscription blasphemously proclaims him as divine. The Pharisees dare not carry such pagan things, yet when Jesus asks for one, it is readily provided. By the way, this whole episode takes place within the temple in Jerusalem, a place dedicated to the worship of the one true God.

By requesting the coin, Jesus is showing that the true issue at stake here is nothing less than idolatry. Whether it's the image of the emperor, or the claim to divinity, or perhaps the love of money, or even the lust for power that lies behind this attempted entrapment, the Pharisees and Herodians are found wanting when it comes to worshipping only the Lord God. And so as Jesus responds, he reminds of this. "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." If Caesar wants his taxes, then so be it. But don't forget the greater thing. This coin has Caesar's image and name, and so it is Caesar's, but where is God's image and name?

Scripture is quite clear. Every human is made in the image of God. There can be no doubt, then, what Jesus means here. Give yourselves to God because it is to him that you belong. It is God who claims us, who made us in his own image. We do not belong to anything or anyone else. We don't even belong to ourselves. We belong to God in all our being, with all our time, talents, and treasures. And as disciples of Jesus, as baptised children of God, we have God's name placed upon us. This means that God will not forsake us.

The Pharisees and other religious leaders that Jesus so often clashed with were notoriously bad at caring for the people. But God does not leave his people without a shepherd. He cares for them, and warns them of the dangers coming their way. As people who belong to God, we also belong to God's church, to the body of Christ, to the group of all believers from every time and every place. This is so much bigger than just an earthly kingdom that may one day collapse.

So God calls us to give of ourselves in service of his church, his people. He calls us to gather together in worship, and to live lives of worship as we go about our vocations. This is how we, as people who bear the image of God, give to God what is God's. It's our whole life. Everything we do belongs to God, because we belong to God. Everything we do then is an act of worship. As we give every second back to God we are worshipping him. And as we live in obedience to valid earthly authority, we obey God's true heavenly authority.

But the two shouldn't get mixed up as the Pharisees did in their trick question. It's helpful to think it about as two different directions. We live in a vertical relationship to God, obeying his perfect authority, worshipping him alone, and giving thanks for all his blessings upon us. And we live in a horizontal relationship to the world, including to those in positions of earthly authority. Being right in this realm is something we can actively work on as follow the rules of society and give back to Caesar what is Caesar's.

In the civil or horizontal realm, we must 'earn' our righteousness, by, for example, obeying the speed limits when driving, or following all the CovidSafe rules in the current Emergency Management Directions. But in our relationship to God, we have nothing to bring but our sin and our need for his forgiveness. Our righteousness in this regard is determined not by our actions but by God's love for us in Christ Jesus. This distinction between our righteousness before God and our righteousness before humanity is crucial in understanding Jesus' response to the question. By calling attention to the different obligations we have to both God and Caesar, Jesus is reminding all his disciples of the differences that exist for us as citizens of the state and citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

This is not always an easy place to be in. But we know that we belong to God. We know that we are made in his image. We know that we bear his name. He will never leave us nor forsake us. This puts everything else into perspective, and actually enables us to live out our calling to love our neighbour as ourselves, and to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's.

So I pray that every day you are aware of whose image and whose name you bear. I pray that you would be strengthened to live out your duties in the civil realm, knowing that ultimately all that you do is in honour of God. And may you always know that you belong to a kingdom that will never pass away because its king is the one true God, who made the heavens and the earth, and who alone is worthy of all honour and glory and praise, both now, and for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.