

In whose image?

Psalm 96: 1-9

Matthew 22: 15-22

Introduction

A little boy desperately wanted £100.00 to buy some toys and prayed to God for a whole week, but nothing happened. So, he decided to write a letter to God requesting the £100.00. When the Post Office got the letter addressed to God, they forwarded it on to 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister surprisingly received it, was very impressed, touched and amused so he instructed his aid to send the boy £5.00.

He thought £5.00 would be a lot to the little boy. And the boy was, indeed, delighted by the money. He sat down and immediately wrote a thank you note, which read: "Dear God, Thank you very much for sending the money. However, I noticed that for some reason you had to send it through Westminster and, as usual, they kept most of it."

Well, people living 2000 years ago did not like to pay taxes anymore than we do today. In fact, there was a raging debate about the morality of paying tribute to Rome.

The gospel text for today has a saying of Jesus that most people, even unbelievers know "Render unto Caesar what is Caesars"? Perhaps this familiarity keeps many from seeing the deeper meaning in this passage.

In addition, some people have taken Jesus words and have extrapolated from them an entire theology of two kingdoms:

The kingdom of man and the kingdom of God and how these two kingdoms are supposed to relate to one another. I believe you will find that Jesus is speaking in this text not about kingdoms, but about images.

So, let's set the scene for yet another encounter between Jesus and Israel's religious leadership. The leaders have decided to craft a question that will entrap him. And, to do this, we find some very strange bedfellows on the planning committee - the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were the ultra-conservative religious party in Israel.

They were denounced by Christ for their purely external observance of the Law and for the multitude of daily rituals and commands they laid on the people commands which even they could not keep. The Temple leadership was riddled with men who were Pharisees. Then, to the far far left were the Herodians. These were Jews who as the name implies were staunch supporters of King Herod and his dynasty, which received its power from the Roman occupiers in Palestine. They were in favour of Rome, Of Roman rule, and the power of the Roman King Herod.

Now, it is the far-right-wing Pharisees and the far-left-wing Herodians who end up conspiring to entrap Jesus. Jesus knew that there had to be some devious intent for these two sects ... to join forces and come together to confront him. The adage: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." was certainly true that day. The enemies of Rome and friends of Rome were united in their opposition to Jesus. So, they come up with what they suppose is a question Jesus cannot wriggle out of. They fashion a question for him that they suppose must be answered with a single Yes or No answer. After some passive sounding flattery, they put the question to Jesus this way: "Tell us what you think: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Empower, or not?" Now, the Romans levied several taxes on the Jews.

There was something called the ground tax it was a tax of ten percent of whatever came out of the ground grains, and wine, and oil. Then there was the income tax, and by our standards this was very light indeedjust one percentof one's cash income with no deductions, of course. And, finally, there was the poll tax.

Most, if not all of us have heard and lived through the poll tax. It wasn't popular in our day and, like most taxes, wasn't popular in biblical times. It is so noteworthy that this parable is recorded in three of the gospels.

Later on, we'll have a look at a reason for this.

Main Talk

The poll tax in those days the tax was a flat tax and it amounted to a denarius which was approximately the wage of a common labourer for one day's work. And it was levied on every male and female until they were 65. It was this poll tax that was the subject of the question put to Jesus by the Pharisees and the

Herodians. It was a special tax, because it had to be paid in Roman silver coinage. Other business and tax matters could be paid in copper coinage, gold bullion, or other acceptable coinage. But the poll tax had to be paid with the Roman silver denarius. And, these coins bore the image of the Emperor, and they were inscribed with an inscription. "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the divine Augustus."

Now, this tax was a point of great controversy among the Jews. The Herodians, of course, were all in favour of the tax. They were in favour of all the Roman taxes. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were very much opposed to paying Caesar any taxes at all. But it was the poll tax that bothered the Pharisees the most, because they had to use a coin which bore a graven image of someone who claimed to be a descendent from a god.

You can see the trap that the Pharisees and the Herodians together had crafted for Jesus. If he answered their question about the poll tax "yes, it is lawful to pay this tax to Caesar," then they would be able to turn the crowds against Him.

On the other hand, if Jesus said, "no, it's not lawful to pay the poll tax," then the Herodians would have promptly brought a charge of sedition against Jesus, the Roman's would have arrested him, and Jesus would be out of their way. Jesus response, of course, crushed their conspiracy. He began by calling them what they are. "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"

The charge of hypocrisy was aimed directly at the Pharisees, for they paid the poll tax even though they judged it to be a violation of two of the ten commandments. Jesus then turns the tables on the conspiracy... "Show me the coin used for the tax,". And they bring him a Roman denarius. "Whose image and inscription is on this?" he demanded. "Caesar's," they reply. "Then render. to Caesar what is Caesar's,". Give to the Emperor the things that are the emperors. The Greek word translated 'render or give' often carries the sense of giving something "back" to whom it really belongs. The coin was given out by Rome so give it back to Rome.

Now Jesus could have stopped here, and that would have been all that was needed to confound the Pharisees and the Herodians alike. The Herodians could not have brought a charge of sedition against Jesus.

As for the Pharisees Jesus had just handed them the very thing, they needed in order to pay the poll tax with a clear conscience! The denarius was not "theirs" in the first place; it was Caesar's. To give the denarius to Caesar was simply to give to him what was already his. In fact, the Pharisees would probably have been joyful as soon as they had digested the significance of what Jesus had said.

But Jesus did not stop there. He added these infamous words, "And render to God, the things that are God's." - Give to God the things that are God's".

At that point, the tables are fully turned on both the Herodians and the Pharisees. Why?

Well, it is fine to give a denarius to Caesar because it bears his image. For that reason, it belongs to him. But what do you give to God? What belongs to God? Well, what belongs to God is that which bears God's image. But what bears the image of God?

In the very first chapter of Genesis, we are told God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." The Scriptures then go on to state, "So God created man in his image...".

We, we are the coins. We are the image of God's realm.

If we are commanded "to give to God the things that are God's," then we must conclude from our Lord's teaching that there is no limit to what we owe God. We owe God our whole being. For we are created in His Image.

And the Pharisees would not have missed that.

They would not have missed what Jesus was really saying about them. He had been hammering them for days for exactly this failure. Do you begin to see why He was crucified. All the parables we have been looking at over the past few weeks lambasted the leaders. And they didn't like it one bit. What He was saying hurt them because he was telling the truth. So, they waited for their moment.

In parables, Jesus told them that they are God's workers in the vineyard, who refuse to give to God the fruit of the vineyard. They are God's sons who say they will serve him, but then refuse. They are the sons of God's Kingdom who refuse to come to the marriage of the King's Son.

Some well-meaning Christians have taken Jesus' words in this text....as a starting point in building a theology of two kingdoms and how government and God are supposed to relate.

We are citizens of one Kingdom The Kingdom of God. We are called to be ambassadors of Christ to this world. We are in the world but not of it.

Jesus words from this text are not about two kingdoms. They are about two images. You were made in God's image... and Jesus is calling us to. " Give to God what is God's!"

Jesus words in today's gospel come down to this: to what degree, in what ways are you and I giving to God what is God's?

The answer to that question must come from this: to what degree, in what ways do you and I bear the image of God. To what degree, and in what ways is the image of Christ evident in each of us? Folks, we are called to Give to God what is God's because we bear his image. How do we portray God's image to the world?

Jesus shared with his disciples and with us today how to be that kind of people: Later on in this chapter of Matthew it says, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Like the Pharisees, we bear the image of God; but unlike them through the power of the Holy Spirit and the Grace of God, we are also being conformed into the image of Christ. Are you portraying the image of Christ? You are a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Yield to his will and allow the Holy Spirit to guide every aspect of your life.

Amen.