

## To Whom do we Belong?

Preached on The Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity  
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ  
Nov. 7, 2021  
Text: Matt. 22: 15-22

We return this morning to the passage we touched on almost a month ago when we discussed the Great Commandment. You will recall that Jesus's enemies were throwing everything they had at him, hoping that he would fall into one of their traps. They even resorted to strange alliances in an attempt to bring him down. The question about paying taxes to Caesar was presented by the Pharisees and Herodians—strange bedfellows indeed. The Herodians were supporters of the ruling house of Herod, the half-native dynasty of collaborationist governors, by whose administration the Roman Empire ruled the conquered land. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were patriots, zealous for the laws and ordinances of God. They were purists, and were scornful of the pseudo-Jewish religion of the Herods, being utterly horrified by the pagan customs they were introducing: the amphitheaters, the temples, the baths, the heathen games, and so on. They didn't for a moment consider the House of Herod as part of the Davidic line. The Herodians, unsurprisingly, were contemptuous of the puritanism of the Pharisees. The opposition between the parties was deep and bitter.

Yet they were united in their desire to see Jesus go. To the Pharisees, he was a scandal who mixed socially with tax-collectors and sinners, broke the Sabbath, and, in general, encouraged people to take lightly the manifold rules so dear to the Pharisee's heart. *And* he was beginning to have a large following. To the Herodians, he was a disturber of the peace. There had been trouble with John the Baptist, and they foresaw more trouble with Jesus. The Herodians knew perfectly well that the Romans would tolerate their government only so long as they could keep things quiet in Palestine.

So, because these two parties had a common interest in making an end of Jesus, they plotted together on how to discredit him. They came up with a very clever scheme that would force the Lord into a Catch 22 by asking "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"

It was a very clever question. If Jesus approved of the tax, he would lose the support of all patriotic Jews, especially of the common people, who hated the foreign overlords. If he disapproved of it, he would be revealed as a dangerous revolutionary against the established government. If he refused to answer, he would lose everyone's respect. It was hard to see how he could escape. He had often slipped through their fingers before, but this time, surely they had him!

Of course, we all know what happens next. Jesus asks them to show him a tribute coin. He then asks whose likeness and inscription is on it. They answer "Caesar's." Then

comes that famous line “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now, at this point, we are supposed to nod approvingly at how Jesus recognizes the need to keep the realms of “religion” and “state, or “sacred” and “secular” separate, in order to give each their due. Even if no one likes paying taxes, and thinks the government is run by idiots, we know that, as Christians, we are supposed to obey the civil authorities. We have Paul in Romans 13 saying “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” that all authority comes from God, and that the ruler does not bear the sword in vain. (vv. 1-4) And in 1st Peter 2: 13 we read “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.”

But before we translate what the Lord says here into our well-worn categories, we need to slow down. For what occurred was not an abstract debate about either political philosophy in general or the relationship between Church and State. It was simply the Lord’s evasion of a very clever, but specific, 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 was a special minting of the denarius, a day’s wage. On the coin was 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 the Second by containing an image of this false god. You could not use such a coin in the Temple.

So 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. It was a very specific, and very narrow, answer that enabled Jesus to prevail here.

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.

Jesus is neither giving a theory about the relationship of religious people to their government nor making a simple division of life into two clear and distinct realms: this is Caesar’s, this is God’s. Rather, he is, doing something subtler, something more profound. Remember, that the coin belonged to Caesar because it was stamped with Caesar’s image (the Greek word here for “image” is *eikōn*) and marked with Caesar’s inscription. The

coin was made by the emperor for the emperor's purposes. That establishes 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? That's right—it's us. 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 stamped, 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? You guessed it.

This, the question of our ultimate loyalty and our deepest allegiances, is what Jesus is really talking about as he eludes the traps of his enemies. The Lord is saying simply that what belongs to God is nothing other than we ourselves. We belong to God, and must return ourselves to him. For there is no higher claim upon us than that of God, and there *can* be no higher claim upon us. There can be no question of a divided allegiance: Caesar is not a God, whatever his pretensions. When we distinguish between Church and State—as neither ancient Jews nor ancient Romans did—we need to be sure that we are *not* saying the Church has nothing ever to say to the State; or that the State is somehow autonomous or "neutral" on religious questions. Neutrality is a myth. Nor must the Church accept that our citizenship in a nation-state automatically trumps every other allegiance—though for many people this statement borders on blasphemy. Nevertheless, for Christians, all competing claims for our allegiance are to be evaluated and understood in the light of whose we are, and whose image we bear.

Of course, 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, or the economy. Problems like these will continue to be difficult and ambiguous, and that won't change even if we toss these verses from Matthew 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 should frame Christian moral and political deliberation. If it doesn't, if Christians are guided purely by pragmatism and self-interest here, or see power and control as the most important thing, then the Church will not present to the world a loving community to be emulated, but merely another bunch of bullies throwing their weight around.

We cannot divide life up neatly into sacred and secular, where our so-called "spiritual" life is in an airtight compartment insulated from our practical, "worldly" life, where things *really* get done. When we try to do that, we put ourselves in great spiritual danger. We are also demonstrating that our faith has no real integrity. When our approach to others ignores God's commands, we deny him. In the Offices of Instruction (pp. 283-

295 in BCP) there appears the question, “What is your duty towards your neighbor?” and the answer given is “To love him as myself, and to do to all men as I would they should do unto me.” Further down, it enjoins us “[t]o be true and just in all [our] dealings, [to] keep [our] tongue from evil speaking, lying, and slandering...” (pp. 288-9) What a difference we would see if our civic interactions at all levels were formed by this ethos! It would be a different world. But that’s the point, isn’t it?

*In the Name...*