

In Whose Image?

Today's Gospel reading is a continuation from the last few weeks where the setting is during Holy Week after Jesus triumphantly entered the city of Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. After cleansing the Temple of the money changers and marketers, Jesus had been teaching in the Temple through the use of parables. These parables were heard by the chief priests and Pharisees and they recognized that Jesus had crafted these parables about them and they were not portrayed in a positive light. Tensions were escalating and with the festival of the Passover drawing near, they needed a way to expose this traveling preacher as being a fake. The Pharisees had to put an end to this charlatan and drive Him out of their city, the center of their religion.

Because of the growing popularity of Jesus among the citizens of the city and them seeing Jesus as a prophet, the time was growing desperate for the Pharisees. We all know that in desperate times people take desperate measures and here we find the Pharisees doing just that. They devised a plan to put Jesus in a box, asking Him a simple Yes or No question. In their desperation, they teamed up with the Herodians to be present with their disciples when they posed Jesus the question about taxes. We need to understand that the Pharisees and Herodians did not get along. The Pharisees ultimate goal was to see the Romans forced out of their country so that they can be independent of foreign occupation. On the other hand, the Herodians, while Jewish in heritage, sided with the Romans and could see their power increasing if Rome's control was maintained. Therefore, both groups had a reason to expose any rabble rousers who threatened the status quo.

By asking Jesus about taxes, they thought they could put Jesus in a box. If He said, "No, the tax should not be paid," then the Herodians could say that He was a traitor to Rome and as such should be treated as an enemy of the state and eliminated. If Jesus said, "Yes, the tax should be paid," they could say that Jesus is not a 'true' Jew

and should not be thought of as a prophet. So, no matter how Jesus answered, it would be the wrong answer.

However, Jesus saw what they were trying to do and responded in a typically Jewish manner by answering their question with a question of His own, showing them that He sees through their trap. The question that they asked as a yes or no question really was actually a short answer type question. It is like asking someone if they have stopped going to the casino yet. The implication of the question is that the person routinely goes to the casino and is a gambler. If they say yes, then that means that they had been going to the casino. If, no, then it means they are still going. However, in truth it may be that they only went to the casino to enjoy the buffet meal or a concert and they did no gambling at all. This is a technique that lawyers use in trials to get the answer that they want to hear without an explanation. Jesus could not answer a simple yes or no without falling into the trap.

The question put before Jesus was about taxes. Is our view of paying taxes affected by our beliefs? Do we see the social programs such as Medicare, Social Security, Welfare and Unemployment as helping others? Do we see the government providing protection for all of its citizens and not for just a select group? Yes, while there are abuses in many government policies and programs, these abuses do not mean that the policy or program is not worthwhile. Is the assistance given to people through the government one way that we give help to those in need; or is it just a waste of money?

Does our perception of what the Pharisees were asking Jesus alter when we consider the kind of tax that they were talking about? This tax was a tax on the person and it was separate from any income tax, property tax or the temple tax. Does making the tax a personal tax somehow change the perceived identity of the person? Did the

Pharisees object to paying any kind of tax to the Romans or just this one which they may have perceived it to giving allegiance to the foreign occupiers?

In His question to the questioners, Jesus pushes the idea of paying taxes to a question of possession. At a first understanding of Jesus' conclusion of "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" it seems to separate the political from religious. While this may not have been the origin of the concept of the separation of church and state, it has certainly contributed to that line of thinking. Over the centuries, it has developed into a belief that there are two "worlds" - the earthly world and the spiritual world. I suppose this derives from humanity's desire to keep choices down to two: black and white; good and bad; public and private; liberal and conservative; Republican and Democrat. Over the centuries, the idea of the separation of church and state waxed and waned. Sometimes the church was very involved in the government and at other times it had little or no influence on government. In the last 30 years or so, religion has found its way back into the political waters of America beginning with the abortion issue, continuing with the Moral Majority and the alignment of conservative Christianity with right wing politics.

When we dig a little deeper into these words of Jesus, we see that they don't advocate for a separation of church and state, but actually means that there is no separation between church and state. Not that there should be theocracy where there is no distinction between government and the church and only one belief system is allowed, but it goes even deeper than that. By asking whose image was on the coin, the Pharisees would have been reminded of the commandments of not making graven images of anything and not making idols. But their thoughts would also extend back further to the creation story and see in whose image humanity was made. That image was of God and if we have been created in the image of God, then we have the image of God on us.

The question for us becomes, not in whose image we are made, but like the coin, whose image do we reflect? Do people see God and Jesus when they look at our actions? As individuals, do we reflect the image of a Jesus who is compassionate and loving towards others, looking to help others or do we reflect an image that is selfish, looking to use others for our own gain? As a community of faith, do we reflect an image that is open and welcoming to anyone who comes into our community, looking to see how we can help those in need or do we keep to ourselves, worrying only about ourselves and how we can protect the community and keep outsiders out?

How is it that we give to God? Do we act like the person who has cashed their paycheck and takes and tosses it in the air deciding that whatever falls down they can keep and whatever stays in the air is God's? Looking at the original text, Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. Perhaps this phrasing is to make us think back to our creation when God said "Let us make man according to our image..." Maybe Jesus is reminding us that just like the coin is Caesar's because Caesar's image is on the coin; we are God's because we were made in the image of God. We acknowledge that we are God's through our baptism in Christ Jesus. All of creation was made by God, therefore it is all God's. We can give to God when we see God in other people and then treat them accordingly. Would we withhold food, clothing and shelter from God? Would we allow God to be abused physically or mentally like many people are? Or, as a celebration of what we've been blessed with by God, do we share with others who are also a part of God's creation?

God made one creation. We have taken that creation and tried to make two worlds out of it, claiming one to be 'ours'. Jesus came to reunite these two worlds, restoring the relationships that God intended at creation but were destroyed because of sin. We can live in that one creation with one world when we let our Christian faith guide all of our actions.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/-tSVvz2QTCQ>

Service: <https://youtu.be/EqQxEapXR3A>