

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
18 October 2020

Matthew 22:15-22

One of the most interesting historical facts I have come across has to do with the Barbarians. This “blood-thirsty” people had been conquered by the Roman empire, but their tendency towards brutality in war never went away. They would often engage in insurrections against the Roman empire. As the Church grew after the death and resurrection of Christ, Christian missionaries made it to the territory of the Gauls, where many Barbarians lived. There is a legend that when a Gaul warrior was to be baptized he would raise high his right arm out of the water as the missionary was dipping him in the water. When the next insurrection or war broke out, the warrior would exclaim, “This arm is not baptized!” He then would take his club or sword or ax and ride on to destroy his enemy in a most barbaric and unchristian way.

Today we have a fascinating reading in the Gospel of Matthew. For the last three weeks we have dealt with parables of the Kingdom, about what it means to do the will of God. Now, we begin to see the opposition doing all they can to get rid of Jesus. The Pharisees and Herodians are testing Jesus, after they come to believe all the parables Jesus has been preaching are against them. They are the disobedient sons who refuse to go into the vineyard (Mt. 21:23-32); they are the wicked tenants who refuse to share the produce at harvest time and kill the son of the Landowner who came to collect it (Mt 21:33-46); they are the evil guests who refuse to come to the wedding of the king’ son or who presume they don’t need a wedding robe (Mt:1-14.) Therefore, the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a more deserving people who are willing to produce fruit.

Now, there are two enemy groups, the Herodians and the Pharisees, who come to ask Jesus to ask him a question. If Jesus does not answer correctly, they can use this to charge him with insurrection and treason. Namely, is it appropriate for Jews to pay the tax to Caesar? If Jesus responds in the negative, they would have enough reason to accuse him of sedition against the Emperor, and he threatens to anger the Herodians who are followers of Herod, King of Galilee, and who are allies of the Romans. If he answers too quickly in the affirmative, he risks upsetting the crowds and the Pharisees who resent paying taxes to the Empire. How Jesus answers determines what happens next in his life and ministry.

The problem here may be as much with the idea of paying taxes to an

occupying, pagan, and evil empire, as it is with the instrument used for the paying of the tax. According to commentators, the Roman coins of the day usually had the image of the seating Caesar with a phrase around him that proclaimed him to be a god or a son of a god. Just the idea of carrying these coins with them, made the righteous Jews unclean because of the strong mandates of Torah against idolatry, graven images, ascribing God-like status to a mortal, etc. For this reason, many Jews would often refuse to carry the coin for the tax and would purchase the coin at the time the tax was to be paid, as the Roman taxes could only be paid with Roman coins.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was not carrying such a coin with him. He asks that a coin be produced. Then he says, "Whose head is this and whose title?" (The word translated as "head" is "Image" in the Greek, eikon, from which we get Icon). Then he says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." His answer is not just about taxes, but about anything that might belong to Caesar and anything that might belong to God.

I think the key to understand this passage can be found in the word "image". "Whose image is this?" Jesus asks. The contrast here is between the image in the coin versus the image in the coin-holder. According to Genesis 1:26-27, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Whereas Caesar deserves to be given back what belongs to him, namely his tax-money, God deserves that we give him what belongs to him, namely our total selves. We belong to God, totally and completely. We bear his image, we are made for his pleasure, we are his. Therefore, we are to give him what belongs to him.

Everything that we are and everything that we have belongs to God. Who we are in our personal lives belongs to God. Who we are in relation to our government belongs to God. Who we are as employees belongs to God... We can't say, like the story of the Gauls, "This arm is not baptized." We can't say, "My Christian values have nothing to do with how I vote. The kind of boss I am has nothing to do with my faith. How I lead my life has nothing to do with being a Christian." If we are the image-bearers then everywhere we go we take our face with us, whatever we are we take the God-image with us. This is inescapable.

There is a great lack of nexus, a lack of congruence, in those of us who are terrible people Monday through Saturday and pretend to be good Christians on Sundays. It is as if we say, "This part of me is not baptized, so I can hold my ax and my club and beat others at will, cut them at their knees, do as I want."

And then on Sundays we say, “This part of me is baptized, so let us give to God what belongs to God.”

My friends every cell in our body belongs to God, every penny in our accounts belongs to God, every molecule of everything we own belongs to him... We can't escape it. We are his. It is for this reason that he forgives our sins through his Son, Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that Christ died for us on the cross. We are his. We are the image bearers, we are individually and collectively God's image in the world. And we are followers of his Son.

At our molecular level there is no separation between our political and moral duties, anymore than there is a separation between church and state. We can't say, “This part of my soul serves God and this part serves the State. This part of my body serves God and this part serves the State. I will serve God in this building and I will serve the State in that building.” We are who we are everywhere we are. We are always Christians, whether we are at the Court house or in this house. We can't be divided, when we participate in the political process and give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, we do it as Christians.

Jesus tells us today that being Christians requires that we engage in the political process, that we pay taxes, that we contribute to a just and fair government, and that we act responsibly to ensure the wellbeing of all. But, whereas our duties to our government are limited, our duties to God are all encompassing. Our duties to God far exceed our duties to any government or any cause. I wonder if we are giving God everything that belongs to God, or if we are giving him the leftovers of our life, those things we have no use for. Today is a day to remember that all we have belongs to him and that he gives it to us in trust for the advancement of his kingdom on this earth.

Today Christ invites us to generosity, to stewardship, to commitment, and to sacrifice. May we remember that we are his and may we act accordingly. Amen!