

20th Sunday after Pentecost, 18 October 2020
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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[Proper 24A: Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22]

Lord Jesus Christ: I daresay, we are tired. Covid fatigue, climate and fire season fatigue, political and election fatigue. Lord Jesus, refresh us. Help us to locate within ourselves your grace-breathing presence, and your perfect prayer, that we may join in your gesture of offering our whole selves and the whole world back into the stream of infinite love from which they come. Amen.

Jesus stands there in the temple precincts, inviting his questioners to inspect with him the silver coin they have just produced at his request. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” Or, more literally, “Whose image—whose *eikon*—is this, and whose inscription?”

Let’s pause right there to ask if that rings any bells in our Biblical memory banks. To people with minds steeped in Scripture, like those for whom Matthew wrote his Gospel, or like those gathered around Jesus at that moment, peering at the coin, what passages might come to mind? I think of two in particular.

First: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exodus 20:3f). Or, in the older and more literal translation that still may resonate for many of us, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven *image*.” And a graven image is *exactly* what this coin was. Jesus asks about the image, and about the inscription.

That inscription was this: “TIBERIUS CAESAR, SON OF THE DIVINE AUGUSTUS,” that is, “son of the god Augustus.” In fact, this coin—like all others it had two sides—was a *double* graven image. The reverse side had as the inscription another of Tiberius’s titles, “PONTIFEX MAXIMUS”, high priest, and showed an image of the goddess Roma, represented by a portrait of the

Empress Livia. (If you saw the delicious 1970s BBC series “I, Claudius”, you’ll remember Livia.)

So much for the whole separation of church and state thing, right? This coin was a *religious object*, as Jesus is making very clear, perhaps to the discomfort of whoever had dug it out of their pocket, and right there in the temple to boot. The controversy around this—this coin *and* the tax for which you were required to use it—was nothing new.

Inspecting the coin, Jesus might have remembered Judas the Galilean, who had led a violent revolt right in the area Jesus was growing up in, when he would have been 9 or 10 years old, a revolt against the Roman census and Roman taxation, against the idolatry of Roman coin and Roman rule. It seems possible Jesus may have seen some of these rebels hanging and dying on crosses on the roadsides when he was a boy in Galilee. Followers of Judas the Galilean, known as Zealots, were still around, and it seems that at least one of Jesus’s close disciples—Simon the Zealot—had belonged to that movement. Simon was probably right there in the crowd that day in the temple watching this deadly debate unfold.

Yes, deadly. Despite the flattering preamble, what Jesus has been asked—“Is it lawful”—(“Lawful” here, of course means “consistent with Torah”—“is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”—is a very loaded question. It’s the *perfect* question. Jesus’s opponents are forcing him to choose between his popularity and his life; either way, he’s out of their hair. If he says “Yes, it’s consistent with Torah”, he’ll immediately be branded a sell-out, and lose the respect and affection of the vast majority who hated Roman rule. But if he says “No, it’s not,” he’ll immediately be denounced to the Romans as a

Zealot agitator, and end up on a cross. Which of course *is* where he ended up, but not over this, not over Rome.

Can you sense the tension, and the danger, in this moment?

So, when we hear Jesus's reply—"Well then, give back to the Emperor that things that are the Emperor's... and to God, the things that are God's"—I think that to hear that right, we need to hear it *first* as absolutely unexpected, and *second*, as absolutely brilliant. It was the perfect trap, and with the perfect answer, Jesus walks away unscathed. *Third*, it's absolutely true, as everybody standing around would have agreed. A Sadducee collaborationist probably would have said, "Absolutely right, Jesus; people should pay the tax to the Emperor!"; and a Zealot probably would have said, "Absolutely right, Jesus; let Caesar take his stinking idolatrous coins and get the hell out of here!"

Which is to say that besides being absolutely unexpected, absolutely brilliant, and absolutely true, Jesus's answer is, *fourth*, absolutely ambiguous. He doesn't *say* what belongs to the Emperor, and what belongs to God.

What do you think?

The mistake that we can make as modern people hearing this text is that we might think that "what belongs to the Emperor" and "what belongs to God" are more or less parallel categories with a clean line between them. But that's our Biblical illiteracy speaking, as well as anachronistic notions of clean, separate "spiritual" and "political" spheres that no one ever thought of until maybe 500 years ago. (Very recently, in other words.) The thing is, if we hear what Jesus is saying with Biblically attuned ears, sensitive to echoes in the Hebrew Scriptures, we'll immediately realize that these are *not* equal, parallel categories. What belongs to God? What might echo with that in the Biblical memory? Try this on, from Psalm 24:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein. For it is he who

has founded it upon the seas and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.

Everything. Everything that is real and true and actually exists. Everything. Belongs. To God. Everything. Not much left for Caesar, right? Or rather, whatever *does* "belong to Caesar" is part of, a subset, of what belongs to God. Whatever "belongs to Caesar"—however big or small that list or category is—belongs first and last, already and always, to God.

Now, maybe I'm making you nervous that I'm preaching theocracy here, which I'm not, at least not in the way that's usually understood. What I'm saying is, I believe Jesus leaves it open—leaves it to his questioners, leaves it to his followers, leaves it to *us*, to sort out—with the guidance of the Spirit, and with our resources of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience and so forth—he leaves it to us to sort it out in different times and different places and under different circumstances, including different political and economic circumstances: Within the big picture of offering *everything* back to God, what *is* the much smaller picture of the legitimate claims of "the state", including what it might mean, in our case, for you and me, to give back to Uncle Sam the things that are Uncle Sam's?

That's a very important question these days, and I'm not sure we Americans are doing a great job at sorting it out. But first and foremost: what does it mean, what *might* it mean, to give back to *God* the whole world, this beautiful, intricately resplendent world that we have so wasted and polluted? This question is pressing for us in a way that would have been impossible to imagine 2000 years ago, and it's a far more important question than taxes. What do you think? What might it mean? What might that look like, for humans to recognize and honor the "earth and all that is in it" as belonging to God? I think it's fair to say that we humans, and we Christians, have not done such a great job on this.

Here at Incarnation we're now in the time of our stewardship pledge campaign for 2021. I'm not going to talk about that at any length here, but I think it's worth reflecting on how the smaller question of how will I honor God with my finances in support of this parish, is a small piece, a subset,

of the larger question: what does it mean, and what might it look like, to remember that we humans are stewards of the creation, that it belongs to God? And what might it look like to honor that reality with our actions, in everything we do? I hope each of us will ask, how can I make my participation at Incarnation a harmonious part of that larger song?

These words of Jesus today have often been taken as letting us off the hook of hard thinking about the real world and the claims of the state. But Jesus's words *are* the hook. His *answer* is a *question* that we need to constantly ask ourselves afresh.

Back toward the beginning of this sermon, I said that when Jesus asked about the image on the coin, it should have triggered echoes of at least two important passages of Scripture. The first was the commandment about graven images. The second is this, from Genesis:

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.
(Genesis 1:26-27)

The coin in Jesus's hand with the image of Tiberius becomes a parable of the human being, held in God's hand and imprinted with *God's* image and the inscription: *I have called you by name, you are mine* (Isaiah 43:1). The whole world is God's—likewise the whole person.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

What do you think? All, all, all.

We are gathered again and again by Jesus to be made whole, to receive the life and very self of God who is all and gives all. Our "all"—my all, your all—is so small in comparison, but in God's eyes it's vast and gorgeous, and we can spend a lifetime struggling and learning to give and offer the *all* that is you, that is me.

Good news: these halting efforts of ours, to give back to God the things that are God's, are blessed and made good by Jesus, who himself holds and offers us in our broken completeness; Jesus, in whose self-offering we are included and made whole, bound together in his Body, offered once and for all and today, for the life of the whole world.

Can you and I become more and more the embodiment of this holy consciousness of offering the whole world and our whole selves, singing a new song, joining in the gesture of giving it *all* back into the stream infinite love from which it comes?