

**Sermon**

Sunday 18 October 2020

## Lesson

St Matthew 22: 15 – 22

We have already had the triumphal entry of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem. A few days earlier, the crowds had carpeted the highway with their cloaks and cut branches, and the prophet from Galilee astride a donkey rode through the city's eastern gate. Bystanders watched Jesus as He overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple precincts. The city was bustling: the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, had come to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Passover; he arrived to reinforce the garrison in the city with heavily armed soldiers. Excitement and tension filled the air.

Pontius Pilate, who would soon authorise Jesus' execution, became the longest serving governor of Judea. He had a reputation for intolerance towards the Jewish people. During his time as governor, Pilate had shields dedicated to Emperor Tiberius set up in Herod's Palace. The palace was the seat of the Jewish king who ruled at the behest of Rome. The presence of shields dedicated to the Roman emperor in a Jewish house was deeply offensive.

On another occasion, it is said that the governor had flags displayed around the city bearing the image of Tiberius. Truly grieved by this idolatrous image, the residents of Jerusalem gathered outside the home of Pilate for five days, eyes cast downwards to avoid the face of Tiberius. When Pilate brought soldiers and threatened to kill the protestors, they lay on the ground, exposed their necks and invited the soldiers to kill them. Pilate backed down.

In our lesson today, the question asked of Jesus was one that readily came to the lips of Jerusalem's people: 'Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?' The Pharisaic followers and members of Herod's party sought to entrap Jesus with their question. If He had answered 'Yes', He would have been accused of betraying

His own people; if He had answered 'No', He would have been considered a revolutionary and guilty of treason and sedition. Some years before Jesus, there was a man, Judas the Galilean, who opposed the paying of the Roman tax. The Galilean said that his fellow Jews were cowards for paying the tax, the tribute, to Rome. Not surprisingly, he was arrested and possibly executed.

With malicious intent, His accusers asked, 'Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?' Were we to set ourselves in that scene with the tension palpable we would see that Jesus remained calm, composed, and peaceful. If we sat there for a moment, we would feel the peace, the shalom, of His soul fill our own. With conviction, Jesus said, 'Show me the coin used for the tax'. His accusers, Herod's men, brought Him a coin. How do you imagine the scene? In our pew Bible, we are told that, 'They handed him a silver piece'. In Greek, it reads, 'They brought him a denarius (a coin)'. In Greek, it is not clear that Jesus held the coin Himself. Did He ask for a coin because He did not have one? In my mind's eye, as they offered the coin to Him, He neither looked at it nor took it but asked, 'Whose head is this, and whose inscription?' They replied, 'Caesar's'.

Remember the shields and the flags – and now the coins. Coins were produced at the command of the emperor and, minted in gold or silver, they remained the property of the emperor. The Roman coin bore the image, the *eikōn*, of Tiberius. It read, 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus'. Tiberius was the son of god. On the reverse side, it read, 'Pontifex Maximus': High Priest. The emperor was son of god and the highest religious figure in the empire. On this small silver coin, a mere denarius, was the greatest claim of anyone in the Roman world. Citizens in every corner of Rome's vast empire carried the emperor's image; a tacit acknowledgement of his divine claim on their lives.

This story of Jesus and the Roman coin centres on divine images and human worth. In the time of Jesus, in a culture of unimaginable brutality, the gods were with the emperor,

the powerful and the rich while the poor, the vulnerable and the powerless were of no account. It is only when we understand how different and unjust things were that we begin to appreciate the radical, compassionate message of the teacher from Nazareth. In the first book of the Bible, in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, we read:

God created human beings in his own image;  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

In Jesus' world, it was not a remotely self-evident truth that every human being possessed equal dignity. Standing before His accusers, Jesus challenged them to pay to God, render to God, what belongs to God: live as bearers of God's image. It is as if Jesus said to them, '*You* are the bearers of God's image, not this coin!'

In the mind's eye, in that ancient scene, we see the image and value system of a Roman god in the face of Tiberius and the image and value of the Hebrew God in the face of Jesus. As He looked in their eyes and not at the coin, we can 'hear' Jesus say, 'God is in you! The Divine dwells in your heart!'

One of the most important figures in recent history, William Wilberforce, a convert to Christianity, was at the forefront of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. Drawing on the insights of the Quaker Movement and the preaching of the former slave ship captain, John Newton, Wilberforce believed that slavery was a stain on the soul of humanity. Against the colossal might of economic and social interests, he said that people could not be commodified. Drawing on those very verses from Book of Genesis, Wilberforce said that all people are made in the image of God; that all of us are bearers of the Divine image.

During the shameful days of racial discrimination in the US in the 1950s and 60s, the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr, said:

Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. Every man must be respected because God loves him.

Even in situations where some Christians have opposed this truth - the equality of women or the dignity of same-sex relationships – nevertheless, the indelible stamp of worth on every forehead is a biblical truth. As we look around the world today, not all countries espouse this truth; not all nations speak of inherent worth and equal dignity. Our debt to Jesus, to His rich religious tradition, is beyond measure. The story of the coin is about the image of God within you and me.

Amen.