

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost (18 October 2020)**Lectionary Reading:** Matthew 22:13-33

There are only two things that are certain in life... death and taxes. We've all heard that joke before. Interestingly, our passage this morning deals with both of those subjects: taxes and the afterlife. Both of those topics remain every bit as controversial now as they were then.

But really there is more going on in this passage. Taxes and death are the pretext. Matthew's simply using these topics to discuss something much deeper.

As we've just heard two groups are out to get Jesus. First, we have the Pharisees, devout Jews scrupulous in their observance of God's law as they understood it. This is probably the religious movement with which Jesus felt the greatest connection. He may have been viewed, at least initially, as a Pharisee although an eccentric one. So there is special irony in certain other Pharisees plotting to entrap him.

The other group is the Herodians, Jews who support the local puppet ruler, Herod Antipas. Little is known about the Herodians as a group, except that Herod and his family were unpopular with the people, and so their supporters must have been unpopular as well.

The Herodians were probably unpopular because they were seen as Roman collaborators. On the other hand, the Pharisees were a grassroots movement generally respected by the people. Pharisees and Herodians differed on several issues, such as whether or not the Jews should pay taxes to the occupying power. It is remarkable,

therefore, to witness representatives of these opposite social forces working together. Evidently both groups felt threatened by the rabbi from Nazareth.

And so they approached Jesus over one of the hot issues of the time. Their language is obsequious to the point of sounding suspicious. Listen to them try to butter him up! Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.

Such fair words, such foul intentions! True, Jesus does not regard people with partiality; he pays no attention to a person's status; he treats everyone with the same respect no matter who they are. But this is his crime in their eyes! He refuses to kowtow to any of these partisans and their narrow views of reality. It is for this reason that they are doing all they can to entrap him and destroy him.

After so sickly-sweet an introduction, they put forward their question: Is it lawful or not to pay taxes to the emperor? They intend to force Jesus to side with one group or another: either with the revolutionaries working to drive out the Romans, or with the collaborators who profit from the occupation.

It would seem that they have presented Jesus with no way out. He can't speak against the tax, for that would anger the Herodians and lead to a charge of treason against Rome. He could not speak in favour of the tax, he would lose credibility and the people's respect, alienating most of the crowds that followed him.

Jesus recognizes their intent immediately and challenges them. Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites. Jesus then asks to see the coin used to pay the tax. He is handed a denarius. A denarius is a silver coin, a day's wages for an ordinary labourer.

Jesus then gives his famous response. He lifts the tax controversy to a different level, well above the deadlock between revolutionary and collaborator. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. In other words, you can pay him this coin and others like it, for after all, his name and portrait appear on them. He has a just claim to property of this kind.

And give to God the things that are God's. What belongs to God? Consider! If the emperor claims a coin that bears his image, then certainly God claims whatever bears his image. But what bears the image of God? Pharisees and Herodians are familiar with the Scriptures. They know the Genesis account of how God makes humanity in the divine image. 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.

The principle is this: Just as the coin has Caesar's icon on it, so it is Caesar's, we were made in the image and likeness of God, so we are God's. Jesus did not care about the tax. His real concern was that we live into the image and likeness of the God who lovingly created us.

We begin to live into the image and likeness of God by conforming our lives to be more like Jesus' life.

We are to be like Christ in His incarnation in the sense that we are all called to follow the example of His great humanity. So Paul could write in Philippians 2:5-8:

“Have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

We are to be like Christ in His service. To go with him to the upper room where He spent His last evening with His disciples. During supper He took off His outer garments, tied a towel around Him, poured water into a basin and washed His disciples' feet. When He had finished, He resumed His place and said: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:14-15).

We are to be like Christ in His love. As Paul wrote: “Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2, NIV). To “live a life of love” is a command that all our behaviour should be characterized by love.

To be like the Christ of the incarnation, the Christ of the foot washing and the Christ of the cross. These events in the life of Christ indicate clearly what it means to live into the image and likeness of the God who lovingly created us.

“What are the things that are God’s which we are to give back to God?” the answer is, “ourselves.”