

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Isaiah 45.1-7 1 Thessalonians 1.1-10 Matthew 22.15-22
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
October 18, 2020

The first couple of times I preached on this gospel lesson, years ago, I talked about taxes and how Christians have understood the power of worldly government. I got into questions like: when should I as a believer support a civil government, and at what point should I start resisting its power? Good questions, and other scripture passages can give us good guidance there. But I finally realized, those questions are not really what Jesus is getting at in today's gospel lesson. He's not giving us a lecture here on appropriate support of civil government, or the purpose of taxes.

Let's look at it: we know that the Pharisees, by this point in the story, are going all-out to get Jesus killed. He had just entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey just like new Israelite kings used to do centuries back, on coronation day (the day they were crowned). The crowd had hailed Jesus as their promised King, waving palms and yelling "hosanna!" Today's gospel takes place right after his triumphal entrance into the city. Now, Jesus is holding forth in the Temple courtyard. The crown hasn't been placed on his head, quite yet.

Now that Jesus, who's a big threat to them, is right there, preaching in the heart of their city next to the center of their religion, the Pharisees are desperate, trying to trap Jesus, box him in with these tricky questions, like the one we hear today, about the tribute tax to the Romans. First they sarcastically compliment him: "Jesus, we know you're sincere, and you teach the way of God in accordance with truth, you're an impartial judge." They think he's an illegitimate poser and shouldn't be teaching at all: he's not one of them. So to put him on the defensive, they ask

him this dangerous question: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now, if Jesus says that it is lawful to pay the tribute tax, he'd be seen as supporting the Roman occupiers, the foreign dictatorship under which they live. It would infuriate all those people who had just proclaimed Him Israel's new king. They don't like Rome. On the other hand, if Jesus says it's not in accordance with God's Word to pay the tax, he risks being branded a political subversive. The Roman authorities could accuse him of sedition. It's a brilliant question, because if Jesus answers either way, someone would have been likely to kill Him. That of course is what the Pharisees are hoping.

But Jesus has a few more things to do before they finally nail him to a cross and put him in a box later that week. So in his typical way, he turns the whole situation around and puts the Pharisees on the spot. He says, "show me the coin used for the tax." They bring him a Roman denarius, a coin commonly used throughout the empire. And you know, it's kind of ironic and funny that the Pharisees are so quick to produce one of these coins. They're obviously in circulation right there on the temple grounds, no doubt the Pharisees themselves are using and handling them all the time, as are the vendors who were selling sacrificial animals for the Temple. Jesus looks at the denarius, and asks them "whose head is this, and whose title?" Now on that coin was the image of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor. And we can be pretty sure of what words were engraved on that coin: Under his image, it read: "Tiberius Caesar, Worshipful Son of the God, Augustus." On the obverse side of the coin, there's an image of Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, with the words, "High Priest." So Tiberius was presenting himself as the Son of the God Augustus, and the high priest of the emperor cult.

Now you know how, every time we turn on a screen or open a paper these days, we see advertisements and political commercials. Well, those Roman coins were very effective political propaganda. The Romans made sure they circulated through all the cultures and nations they ruled. A denarius physically reminded everyone throughout the empire of who held unquestionable political, economic, and military power. The emperors made no bones about it: they were to be regarded virtually as gods. Now, you could take part in whatever religious practices you wanted, as long as you didn't cross the line. Any religion, any god, that might motivate you to go against Caesar, was going to land you in a bad place.

Notice how Jesus uses those special words: whose *image*, whose *inscription* is on the coin? It's important, because he uses those words, "image" and "inscription," to make those Pharisees remember the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an *image* in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."

And then, after reminding them of the first commandment, Jesus says, well: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." With one statement, Jesus has cornered them. They're amazed and walk away speechless. He's reminded them: A person can have only one allegiance. Who do you worship? Who does all this belong to? Who holds your life in his hands? God, or Caesar? Who do you listen to? Who do you follow? Who do you trust? Where is your deepest loyalty?

Jesus is not going to be drawn into a lecture here on how much, or when, or when not, to pay taxes, or what worldly programs we should support with our money. He knows the Pharisees

don't really care about the substance of any of that. Their motive with the question is to box Jesus in, to subdue him, draw him into an argument, brand him as being on one side of the issue or the other, and cut him off from half his support. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Sounds like Caesar's politics. He knows they're worshiping Caesar, because just like Caesar, what they really care about is keeping their own power. It's not about setting anyone free from slavery. It's a game, where they're trying to build themselves up, always at the expense of others, a game where only certain people come out on top, a never-ending fight that ends in human tyranny, death and nothingness. That's where their human-centered religion and politics will lead them. They are reflecting the false god they worship. So Jesus goes straight to the substance: the first question should always be: which god are we worshiping? Who is he? What has he done in history? How does God act?

The power of sin is constantly pulling us away from the power of the living God, the source of all life and blessings. Our first temptation every day is to break the 1st commandment and set ourselves up as judges and gods in our own right. We play Caesar's game, and there, all we learn is how weak and small we are. We get all caught up in those power games we can never win.

Later that same week, Jesus the true king was finally crowned with thorns, nailed to a cross and put in a box. And that's where, for you and me and for everyone, he broke the hold that that sinful, fear-filled, arguing, fighting life has on us. That's where he restores us to a peaceful and joyful relationship with the Father of lights, from whom all blessings flow. And now, you and I can know and trust the true master, the true King, no matter what the world is throwing at us every day, trying to box us in.

People are always going to disagree how best to politically witness to God's way of peace and justice for the world. Christians are always going to disagree about taxes, I'm pretty sure. But one thing we can be sure of: those who believe in Christ the King will always pose a clear and present danger to the false gods and tyrants of this world. We've always been a threat to them, even though all we're doing is following in the way of the Savior, who came to suffer for others, and serve. Millions of believers have died under tyrannical governments. Caesar has always feared us, because he knows that he'll never be able to put us in a box. We always rise up. The power of the resurrection...the power of life itself...cannot be contained. You and I live by the unbeatable Spirit of our Lord Jesus. Every Caesar, past or present or future, will be cast down until Caesar faces his final catastrophe.

Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus would tell us how to spend our money and who to vote for? Be of good cheer! Let your hearts not be troubled. All the resources in the world, and all the power to change the world would be nothing if we didn't know the one who owns it all. And who has used it all, who has spent himself completely on a cross, so that you and I can be free to worship and praise him all day, every day.