

Pentecost 20 18th October 2020 Matthew 22:15-22

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

'In whose image are you made?'

If you a politician and you are trying to get under the skin of your political opponents, then one way of doing that is to ask a carefully crafted question to which there is no way out. Rather than being a desire to seek the truth or to benefit society some way through honest conversation, the tactic is simply to put the other person at risk.

As we move towards the end of the year, and the end of Matthew's gospel, this is what many of the religious leaders are trying to do with Jesus. Jesus has gained a very popular following among the ordinary people and is risking destabilising the delicate power arrangements with the Roman occupiers. The last thing the religious elite want is any risk of social upheaval.

So they come at Jesus with this carefully crafted question about whether it's legal to pay taxes to Caesar (that is, the Roman Emperor).

Over the last couple of weeks, we've heard Jesus confronting the Chief Priests and the Pharisees, through the use of parables, with their failure to realise God's vision for Israel, if not by actively working against that vision. Two weeks ago there was the parable about the owner of the vineyard handing over the vineyard to new tenants. Last week we had a parable which draws a contrast between the violent kings of this world and the nonviolent kingdom of Christ. After hearing these parables, aimed at them, the both religious and political leaders are lining up to find a way of getting rid of this troublesome Jew.

The attempted entrapment for Jesus is that the Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to align himself with one of two major political movements...either the Roman State, or the Jewish Zealots, both of which utilised coercive force to achieve their aims.

The attempted entrapment of Jesus hinges around a particularly dreaded Roman tax. In year 6CE, (around the time of the birth of Jesus) the Romans, as the occupying force in Israel, imposed a census tax on every person. The tax was one days wages a year...a denarii coin, upon which was an image of the Emperor, and the inscription which said, "*Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus*". Jews hated this for two reasons, firstly because they hated paying for the army that was oppressing them, and secondly, because of the idolatry of Emperor worship. This tax, among other things, triggered a nationalistic movement by Jews, including a gorilla warfare movement in country regions. Simon, the Zealot, one of Jesus disciples seems to have spent some time in this movement. It was this undercurrent of violent revolution that grew into a revolt which eventually led to the complete destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE.

So Jesus is being enticed into a lose-lose choice. Is it lawful to pay this tax to the Emperor? If Jesus says, "Yes – it's lawful" then he's aligning himself with the Violent Roman State and with idolatry, and his future as a respected Jewish teacher will be at an end.

If, however, Jesus says, "No-it's not lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor", then he'll be seen to be aligning himself with a revolutionary movement, and he's like to be crucified by the Romans...which is no doubt why the Pharisees have brought some members of Herod's cronies along to listen to Jesus' reply.

Now Jesus sees the nature of the entrapment...he thinks to himself (perhaps), "Here you are...you are trying to align me with the forces of violence and destruction...either the violent Zealots, or the violent State, and I'm not going to buy into either one". It's worth us noting that kind of violent dualism which tries to entice us to take sides is played out ever day in our world in social media. Both left and right sides of politics can be savage if we don't join their particular project. We can also see the savagery of this kind of dualistic debate being out in the Unites States elections.

Jesus refuses to the answer the question in the terms that it's been asked. The question has been asked of Jesus in terms of Jewish LAW. But Jesus reframes the question is terms of divine IMAGE. In making decisions about ethics – about how we should behave, the first question Jesus puts to us is, 'in whose image are you made'? Is the decision I am making reflecting the character of God reflected in the face of Jesus?

Some significant Christian movements, such as the Quakers and Mennonites thought that reflecting the divine image would mean withholding taxes when those taxes were being used for purposes inconsistent with the love of Christ.

For example, in 1761, the Quaker Minister, Joshua Evans, said:

"Although I have been willing to pay my money for the use of civil government, when legally called for; yet have I felt restrained by a conscientious motive, from paying towards the expense of killing men, women and children, or laying towns and countries waste"
(Wikipedia)

This may or may not be the conclusion we come to – but at least the question was being taken seriously.

Jesus says that it all starts with images. This is because we are formed by the images we look at, as advertisers well know. The ancient world knew this a long time ago, which is precisely why the first of the 10 commandments is a prohibition about making images of God. We are to imitate the divine image, not try to MAKE the divine image in our likeness. The Roman coin is imprinted with the image of the Emperor, so don't spend too much time gazing at it – rather, give it back to Caesar...but we as human beings are imprinted with a different image...which is the image of Christ. We are *stamped* with the image of Christ.

We as Christians might decide to give the government our money, which is inscribed with the Royal image, but we are NOT to give the government our ultimate loyalty. We give ourselves to the one in whose image we are made. To give ourselves to the divine image is to be shaped into the character of Jesus....whose character is peace. St. Paul, brilliantly, put it this way:

We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

What that means for each one of us will be different. What does it mean to YOU to be made in the divine image – the image of Christ?