

Homily for Proper 24A
S. Stephen's Church, Providence
October 18, 2020

And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's a moment that could be lifted out of our own times –
a question worthy of a presidential or vice presidential debate stage.

The Pharisees, together with the Herodians,
two rival groups with a common enemy in Jesus,
try to entrap him,
and generate a 15-second sound bite that replay over and over,
and use it to destroy him.

Well, it almost works –
but as we've seen in these "entrapment" stories the past few weeks,
Jesus is pretty politically adept,
and won't be shaken or go off message.

What is a straightforward enough question,
"Is it lawful to pay taxes or not?"
is actually loaded,

and they figure that Jesus will lose no matter how he answers it:

either he will anger the religious authorities

or he will incur the wrath of the civil authorities.

If, on one hand, he says it is not lawful,

he will be defying the Empire and Caesar,

which will have disastrous consequences.

If, on the other hand, he says it is lawful,

he will seem complicit in the forces of empire

under which Israel finds itself so heavily oppressed,

and alienate all his own supporters.

What does he do?

Well, he re-frames the question.

After calling them out on their hypocrisy and conniving,

he asks them for a coin.

Jesus instead asks them a question,

“Whose face is it on this coin? Whose likeness and inscription?”

And when they answer,

Jesus indeed delivers a soundbite worthy of replaying,

but he has won the moment and left them stunned:

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,

and unto God the things that are God’s”

Mic drop, as some of us younger folks would say today.

Now, on one hand,

there is a practicality to Jesus’s answer that we cannot deny:

we live in a world in which we must participate in secular and civic life:

we pay taxes and utility bills and parking tickets –

money etched not with the likeness of Caesar,

but with the likenesses of George Washington,

Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln,

and occasionally even Benjamin Franklin.

But in whose likeness and image are you and I made?

Jesus’s pithy answer which neatly divides things into

secular and religious,

doesn’t quite capture the complexity of life – or does it?

How many times do we hear the phrase “separation of church and state?” –

a phrase not found in the Constitution, by the way –

it merely says there shall be no established religion.

None of us can be compartmentalized in such an easy way,
and neither can our lives or the society we live in.

I ask you again, whose likeness do you bear,
and in whose image are you made?

You are made in the image of God – all of us are.

And the truth is that everything belongs to God and comes from God –
even that coin with someone's head etched into it.

And so while we are citizens of a country,
and pay its taxes and salute its flag,

we are also citizens of a heavenly country – an invisible kingdom –
which has as its own currency – its own coinage –
one quite different from what Caesar would be used to trading in.

Jesus's answer to the Pharisees basically acknowledges

that an imperial tax can be paid as necessary,

without it being a vote of support for Rome or its cruel ways.

Paying taxes acknowledges the political power,

but not its moral authority to rule.

Only God has that moral authority,
and so he says to pay to God the things that are due to God.
So this morning I invite us to consider the coinage of God's realm,
and the ways in which we are called to participate
in the life of God's kingdom;
a kingdom in which acts of love and costly self-offering
are the currency of true value,
as opposed to brute power and monetary influence.
You bear the image of one who created you,
and who loved the world so much that he gave himself for it,
so that it might have life, and have it abundantly.
And yet while we consider the ways in which we are God's children
first and foremost,
the reality is that we do live in a particular nation,
and we do pay taxes, and vote.
As I said earlier,
we cannot really neatly separate ourselves nor our world
into two neat compartments.

Most of us want the world to be a better place, generally,
and we want the society we participate in to reflect that as well.

As Christians, we should fervently hope
that our world might always more and more look like the kingdom of God
that Jesus describes and enacts.

So when we participate in the life of our country,
as Christians, somewhere in our hearts and minds
must be the longing and desire for God's kingdom.

Ultimately, all things belong to God,
and all true authority derives from God's authority.

At my parish in Essex, Connecticut,
when the offering was brought up to the altar at the Offertory,
the celebrant would lift up the plates and say

“All things come of thee, O Lord,”

to which the congregation would respond

“and of thine own have we given thee.”

Some of you probably grew up with that as well, I suspect.

“All things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee.”

It encapsulates a great truth about our lives.

All that we have is ultimately from God,

and so when we return thanks to God,

it is only made possible out of God's own abundance.

The Eucharist – the celebration of the Mass –

defines our lives as Christians:

yes, right now, we are leaving our offerings at the back of the church,

and there is no procession of bread and wine,

nor of the offering plates, due to our COVID restrictions:

but when we bring our money, and the bread and the wine,

to the altar to be blessed and consecrated,

we are really and symbolically offering the entirety of our being –

the entirety of our lives – our love and our labor – to God,

so that God may take them, bless them, and transform them.

We are called to Eucharistic living,

in which our lives are taken, blessed, and broken open,

so that they may be given for the life of the world.

“Render unto God the things that are God's,” we are told.

Render unto God the things that are God's.

Friends, what creature, what person, what resource –

what under the Sun in this world does not belong to God,

by whom all things were made? Things visible and invisible?

Render unto God the things that are God's, yes:

render love, mercy, justice, light, compassion, hopefulness,

gentleness, fortitude, wisdom, beauty, and kindness –

and remember whose likeness you bear,

and in whose image you are made –

you beloved child ... beloved children all,

made in the image and likeness of God.

Amen.