

Sermon on Matthew

Fr Chester – St Peter’s, Brighton Beach

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This morning’s Gospel reading presents us, and Jesus, with a tricky conundrum.

Politically, just about the only thing Pharisees and Herodians have in common is that they don’t like Jesus.

So, they hold their noses, put aside their multiple differences for a moment, and collude together to pose Jesus a question in the hope that they will put him between a rock and a hard place: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

And therein lies the potential pitfall. If Jesus answers that the taxes are lawful, he will give offense to the Pharisees and the many in the crowds who despise the empire’s incessant meddling, not to mention the poor who are especially burdened by this particular “flat tax.” On the other hand, if he protests against the tax, it won’t take long for the Herodians, who are loyalists to Rome, to take news of such seditious talk back to the powers that be. It is a well-laid trap, and all the more so because it is prefaced by a flattering reminder that Jesus has a reputation that precedes him for fearless truth-telling and an aversion to political game-playing.

So, Jesus is not easily fooled by the potential perils of the question, but he does oblige them by addressing the dilemma they place before him. But first, he reframes the issue subtly by asking to see the coin used to pay the tax. This is a sly move because it allows all the witnesses present to see for themselves what Jesus already knows: Jesus is the one being put on the spot, but it is his questioners who are deeply entangled in sin.

When they produce the coin of the realm, Jesus delays his answer another moment in order to make one more thing clear: “‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he

said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s’”.

The consensus at the time appears to have been that Jesus managed to escape the trap set before him, but it’s not always clear that anyone exactly what he was getting at. Some people point to this passage as proof that God and politics should be kept separate and that things like taxes have absolutely nothing to do with one’s theological insights and convictions. Others say that this story proves that religion is a matter of the heart, and that Jesus isn’t really concerned about material things like what you do with your money. And some have quoted this passage as proof that Jesus taught that the law is the law, and our duty as Christians is to support the government no matter what.

Like many things Jesus said, these words are hard to pin down to just one single meaning; they seem to unfurl upon reflection into a treasure of wisdom. The more we think about this enigmatic saying, the more it reveals to us. The richness and subtlety of the answer is further enhanced when we remember that Matthew’s Jesus has already spoken on the subject of money and divided loyalties: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”. Whatever Jesus is alluding to here, he must not be describing a compromise that divides human loyalties neatly between God and the emperor.

By highlighting the physical features of the denarius used to pay the tax, Jesus gives us a few things to ponder. In the first place, the image of the emperor stamped into the coin’s surface, along with the blasphemous inscription with its claim to divinity², call to mind the prohibition against images and idols described in Exodus. By pointing out that his opponents possess and display such an object within the sacred Temple grounds, Jesus seems to raise, not lower, the stakes of the conversation about money and human loyalty. The primary issue here is nothing less than idolatry.

Furthermore, when we think about Jesus highlighting the physicality of that denarius (the coin stamped out by human hands for human purposes, and the image of Caesar imprinted on it) it's hard to ignore the connection to those words from the beginning of Genesis about what God said the first time God stamped out a human being: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness".

Confronted with the question of human loyalty and the coin bearing the image of the earthly emperor, it's easy to picture Jesus flipping that coin in his hand a couple of times, and then tossing it casually aside. In my mind's eye I see his eyes rising to meet those of his opponents, confronting each of them with an unspoken question hanging in the air: "And you, my friend: Whose image do you bear?"

One thing, at least, seems clear: Jesus is not solving the dilemma by carving out separate domains of human loyalty. For every character in the narrative, and for each of us who read and think upon it, one absolute commitment subsumes and relativizes all other commitments.

Whatever we render unto "Caesar", or to the superannuation fund, or to the collection bowl at church, we can never afford to forget this: we belong entirely to God. We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our loyalty to Jesus. Our coins bear many different images in Australia, but each of us as Christians bears another more profound imprint on our hearts. We must therefore never forget to render unto God the things that are God's.

Amen.
