

The Coin of God's Realm

Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

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The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. David's Episcopal Church, North Chesterfield, VA

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 22:15-22 (NRSV)

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹ 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." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

In last Sunday's gospel, we heard the first of three consecutive readings from the 22nd chapter of Matthew. In chapter 22 we hear Jesus' responses to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and to a legal expert associated with the Pharisees. But the chapter began last week with Jesus telling the religious authorities that "**many are called, but few are**

chosen.” The lectionary continues this week and next with the authorities confronting Jesus and trying to trap him with trick questions.

This morning we'll be looking at Jesus' response to the Pharisees about giving to the emperor what belongs to him and giving to God what belongs to him. But I'd like to begin with a true story from World War II. It's told by Ernest Gordon, who was a British prisoner of war in Burma (now Myanmar) during World War II. He and his fellow prisoners were the men forced to build the famous "Bridge on the River Kwai," part of the Burma Railroad. He tells how prisoners were starved and beaten and grotesquely mistreated by the Japanese. They suffered cruelly from disease and malnutrition. Men were dying all the time.

At the beginning of their captivity, their misery made the prisoners callous towards one another. Every man was out for himself. They would steal from one another. They paid no attention to the weak and the dying. But slowly, stories of self-giving love of some for others began to circulate. One in particular impressed everyone who heard it. After a cruel work day, shovels were counted, and one was missing. The furious guard ranted at the prisoners in the work detail that the guilty man must step forward. If not, he shouted, "**All die! All die!**" He pulled back the bolt on his rifle and aimed it at the assembled prisoners. Then one man stepped forward and said, "**I did it.**" The guard savagely beat him to death. After the shovels were counted a second time, none were found to be missing. But the response of the men who heard about this wasn't what you'd expect. Gordon said that rather than increasing their hatred for the guards, it increased their love for their fellow prisoners.

As tales of this kind of voluntary suffering for one another circulated around the camp, men began to look out for one another. They began to care for the sick and tend to the dying. Faith in Jesus spread through the camp. They built a crude church and worshiped the Lord.¹

I tell this story because it's about people, and the point I'd like to make this morning is that people are important to God.

The Pharisees seem to be interested in people only so long as people obey rules and principles. Last week Elizabeth talked about how our fears can make us susceptible to worshipping idols instead of God. For the Pharisees, fear of disobeying God led them to make an idol out of rules and principles.

Jesus is a threat to their approach, so they're trying to get rid of him. They ask him a trick question about a rule or principle. That's the way they do things. They ask,

¹ Gordon, Ernest, Through the Valley of the Kwai; New York: Harper & Row, 1962. pp. 85-113

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” This is one of three trick questions the religious authorities ask in this chapter. But Jesus turns the tables on them with a visual aid—a denarius, a common coin worth a day’s wage for a soldier or a laborer. Roman coins were minted for several reasons. They were money, of course. But the emperors put their likeness on the coins to remind people who was in charge. In an age without newspapers or social media, the emperor’s image reminded people of his authority every time they bought or sold anything. Coins with the emperor’s likeness were the coins of the realm—legal tender and a reminder of the emperor’s authority.

Jesus points to his visual aid and asks whose picture is on it. The Pharisees say it’s the emperor’s. Jesus’ response has passed into our language as a commonplace saying: **“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”**

What is Jesus saying here? Is he teaching us to be good citizens by paying our taxes? That’s part of it. But by calling out attention to the image on the coin, he’s putting us in mind of whose image is on us. The denarius was the coin of Caesar’s realm. Human beings, who bear God’s image, are the coin of God’s realm. This is why people are important to God.

Our gospel reading is taken from Matthew 22. In next week’s gospel a lawyer, again looking for a rule or a principle, asks Jesus another trick question: what is the greatest commandment? Jesus says, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”** Because human beings are made in God’s image, loving your neighbor and loving God are the same thing. You can’t do one without the other. Loving God is loving your neighbor and vice versa. We might call this a great equation.

But even a superficial glance at world history or the news will show that human beings constantly devalue one another. It may be just an attempt at humor, the way school teachers say their job would be so much easier if it weren’t for the students. Or clergy who say the same thing, only about parishioners. And then we have cruel and despotic people like Hitler, Stalin, Attila the Hun, and Idi Amin. Or it, seems, both sides in the current war in Gaza. It seems the way of the world is to oppress and devalue and dehumanize the coin of God’s realm. The most despicable is the practice of slavery and human trafficking.

But none of this is new. In the 18th chapter of Revelation the corrupt and sinful world system, symbolized by Babylon, is destroyed by God’s judgment. The

merchants are weeping and wailing because no one buys their cargoes any more. The cargoes are listed in order of value from the most to the least valuable. The list begins with gold, silver, jewels, and pearls. And it ends with **“human bodies and souls”** (Revelation 18:13, note)

This is a stark indictment of what this world without God values and doesn't value. What Jesus is telling Pharisees in this morning's gospel is that we are to **“Give to God the things that are God's”**—namely ourselves. We are to give ourselves to the good and blessing of other people, no matter who they are. People are important to God. That's why God became a person, Jesus. By living—and dying on the cross for all of us, he said, **“I did it”** for every one of us to save us from a fate worse than death. As we say in the creed, **“For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.”**

God became a human being to show us that people matter to him. That's why he gave himself for us, so we are to give ourselves for one another, just as he did. Let me suggest 3 steps to help you love your neighbor. **First**, fix in your mind and heart exactly what Jesus has done for you in his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. Ernest Gordon's story of the man who said **“I did it”** is a true story. What Jesus has done for you and me is a true story. Make it your own story.

Second, think and pray about what your life was like before you understood what Jesus has done for you and what it's like now that you understand. Develop a way of explaining that to someone else. You may want to practice with someone else, or record it in your phone and play it back until you can share it with confidence. **Third**, pray every day for an opportunity to share what he's done for you with another person.

All this may make you uncomfortable. But so be it. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. It's the least we can do for him. We'll be loving God and our neighbor. People are important to God, and they need to know him and his Son Jesus Christ, who stepped forward and said, **“I did it”** for us all. Amen.