

Give to God what is his!

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Jesus is in a tight spot, as he so often is in the Gospels. You could say he has put himself there. He has been telling parables, parables that are none too subtle in their message. We've heard a series of them over the past few weeks. Stories of wedding banquets, where the wedding guests refuse the invitation; where sons who ought to help don't. The Chief priests and Pharisees aren't stupid. They can see who the target of these stories is - them. And they don't like it. So they plan their fight back.

They send some of their stooges along to Jesus with an apparently serious question. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere. (a bit of flattery follows to soften Jesus up). Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

The problem was not only that the taxes were being paid to the Romans, the hated occupying forces, but that the coins with which they had to be paid bore an image of the head of the emperor, the emperor who was regarded as divine. This broke the commandment not to make graven images. It was absolutely fundamental to Jewish law. Good Jews were left in a huge dilemma. Break the Jewish law and keep the Romans on your side, or break the Roman law, but keep in the good books of their Jewish friends (and, they thought, of God.)

It's a dilemma to which there was no easy answer: So they know when they ask Jesus this question that there is no reply he can give which will keep everyone happy - that's why they ask it. Whatever he says they will have grounds to accuse him to someone - either to the Jewish leaders as a collaborator, or to the Romans as a revolutionary.

But unfortunately they aren't as clever as they think. When Jesus asks them to show him a coin, they are caught off guard and instantly reach into their pockets for one, and they are hoist on their own petard. They might disapprove of these coins, but at least one of them has got one, and what is more, when we look at this passage in its context we discover that they are standing in the Temple at the time. They have brought a graven image of the Roman emperor into the most sacred place in the Jewish world. Jesus could have just shrugged and walked away. He has punctured their self-righteousness - they are no better than anyone else, caught up in the inevitable contradictions and complexities of human life. If we think we are going to be able to get through life floating in a bubble above the mess of the world we can think again. But that is not the end of the story. There is something else they need to learn, something which, had they known it might have prevented them trying to play a trick like this in the first place.

"Give Caesar's what belongs to him" says Jesus. But then he goes on "and give to God the things that are God's". And that is the sting in the tail. The coin is the emperor's - it bears his image to state that very clearly. But it's not just the emperor's image he sees

before him. He also sees something that bears the image of God. The Bible teaches, right from the beginning that each of us is made in the image of God. It's there in the Book of Genesis - "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them." Whoever we are, whatever we have done, we reflect God in some way. We bear his image, just as much as the coin bore the image of Caesar. Give to the emperor what bears his image, says Jesus, but give to God what is his, which is nothing less than the whole of us.

It's not about a superficial decision to do this or that thing, but rather a basic orientation that Jesus is calling us to regard ourselves - and one another - as God's and to live in the light of that, with all the joy and the demand that brings.

In silence, let's reflect on what it might mean for our lives if we took that call seriously - giving to God what is God's, nothing less than our whole selves, and seeing what is God's in others too.

AMEN

Based on Material by

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