

## Who's Image?

Proper 24, Year A – Matthew 22:15-22

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 19, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Our readings each Sunday are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the newest of the translations of Scripture that are authorized by the Episcopal Church for use in public worship. But sometimes I'm not totally pleased with the translators' choices. This morning's Gospel lesson is a case in point. Perhaps like many of you, when I read this passage I found myself saying, "Hey, that's not how that goes." So I looked up the passage in the older Revised Standard Version and found that it was indeed different. With that in mind, let me re-read a portion of this morning's lesson from that version.

Jesus said, "Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Cæsar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Not Caesar's head on the coin, but his *likeness*. Now, since scholars consider the NRSV to be one of most accurate translations available, I thought maybe the newer version was a more accurate representation of the original. But the Greek word is "ἰκων" which definitely means "representation," or "image," or "likeness," definitely *not* "head." As a matter of fact, the King James Version uses the word "image" in this passage. So it turns out that the older version is the more faithful translation after all.

It's not a huge difference, but we'll get back to it in a minute.

Unlike the ancient Romans, we don't mark our money with the image or likeness of our current ruler. Most of our coins or bills have the likeness of one or another *dead* president stamped into them. But every one of the coins in my pocket, and no doubt every one in any of *your* pockets, has the words "United States of America" stamped into it. The inscription, the *verbal* likeness of our nation is graven on the coin of the realm just as surely as Cæsar's head marked the denarius that was handed to Jesus. That's because then as now, the *government* owns all the money. It gets passed to us in one way or another so we can use it. But the government's mark of ownership is still on it, and they most certainly demand it back when time comes to pay their share. And I should know, I got an extension back in April and had to pay the government their share just last Wednesday

"Render to Cæsar," Jesus said, "the things that are Cæsar's."

"Ah," you say, mentally wagging your finger at me, "but that's *not* where the saying ends!" And you're absolutely right. Jesus definitely did *not* stop there. He went on to say a significant bit more.

"Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's," he said, "and to God the things that are God's."

Render to God the things that are God's. So how do we find out what belongs to God? If we really want to figure out what belongs to God, we can use the same technique Jesus used to talk about what belongs to the state. This is where that little difference in translations becomes important. Because all we have to do if we want to figure out what belongs to God, is look for something that has, not Cæsar's but *God's* likeness stamped upon it. And we certainly don't have to look far. There's only one thing that we can lay our hands on that fits that description. There's only one thing in the story of everything that qualifies. There's only one thing in all of creation that Scripture tells us that God ever stamped with his likeness. It's way back there at the beginning in the opening passages of the Book of Genesis. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them..."

There's only one thing that God stamped with *God's* likeness. *One thing* that God created in *God's* image. *One thing* into which God himself breathed his own living Spirit. *One thing* in all that is,

seen and unseen. *One thing* that is marked as “*τεκων*” of God. And that, dear friends, is you and me. In his final act of creating at least this universe, God created you and me, and marked us as his own, just as surely as the coin is struck by the minter’s die.

“Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

We do a pretty good job, most of us, rendering unto Cæsar what is Cæsar’s. The government has collectors and police and lawyers to make sure of it. But how many of us are as meticulous about giving God his due.

There’s an old joke about the little girl whose mother gave her two quarters. Her mother told she could keep one quarter, and told her to put the other into the collection plate at church. On the way to Sunday School, the little one dropped one of the coins and it got away from her, rolling over the edge of the curb, and down the storm drain. “Oh dear,” the little girl said, as she peered down the grate, “look what happened to God’s quarter.”

There’s only the one thing that God stamped with his likeness. And, as you’ve heard me say over and over again, there’s only the one thing that God requires of us. That is to live into the image in which we have been created. We are stamped with God’s likeness in our essential ability to love, with the inherent ability to see the maker’s mark in each other. What God requires of us is to love him and to love one other. What belongs to God is, in the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, ourselves, our souls and bodies. What we are required to render unto God just happens to be everything we have, everything we are, everything we can even imagine or hope to be. It’s that simple: “Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s, but to God the things that are *God’s*.” So what are we supposed to do about it?

You see, Jesus’s command is more than a witty, politically savvy answer to an entrapping question. His command is a call to action. It is a call away from our inclination to consider ourselves self-sufficient, contained within ourselves. It is a call away from the notion that what we do, or what we say, or what we *give* really doesn’t matter to anyone but ourselves. It is a call away from smug complacency that we have somehow done “our part,” that we have somehow completed our term of service, that we have somehow given “our fair share.” It is a call away from the concept that what we have – or rather, what we have been given – that what we have, or even what we *are* can be used to get *our* way, to advance *our* agenda, to make *our* statement on this issue or that.

In stamping us with his likeness, God has made us *his* representatives to his creation, his messengers to and among one another. In stamping us with his likeness, God has sent us into the midst of a world filled with pain and suffering, filled with bitterness and despair, filled with anxiety and fear, filled with divisiveness and discord, and he has called us to render the full measure of his love with everything we have and everything we are. In stamping us with his likeness, God has called us to bring our love for Christ into action, in our family, in our community, in the world. Sometimes that requires us to give of our time. Sometimes that requires us to give of our wealth. Always, always, *always* that requires us to give of ourselves. When we freely give *ourselves* to the one who made us and marked us with his own image, when we freely open *ourselves* to one another, Christ becomes not just *involved* in the world, but capable of *transforming* it.

“Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s,” our Lord says, “but render to *God* the things that are God’s.” To be sure, we can do no more than this. But to be true to God’s image created in us, true to our calling in Christ, we *must* do no less.