

MATTHEW 22:15-22
THE IMAGE OF GOD

Image is everything! We live in an image-age. If I put a picture of Harvey Weinstein on the screen, everyone will know the story that goes with the picture and I need to say nothing! “A picture is worth a thousand words” someone once said and there is a truth in that. Company logos are everywhere, even at times without the name attached and people know the image, you don’t need words because the brand image has become known world-wide. People make a living by their image and that can become a problem or an issue for people, how to keep that image or project a better image and so images are changed, are touched-up, or tampered with and we are made to think that a particular image, shape or size is the best image; those who don’t have that image, or that shape, or size are made to feel second-class at best, worthless at worst. But image is nothing new; image is an idea that is as old as time and it is at the heart of our story today: an image on a coin, an image in a human being!

This week’s debate about men and women in Hollywood is actually interesting in this question of image. The Bible says that “*God created...*” (*Genesis 1:27*) That is where we start when we try to understand what it means to be a human being; we are made in the image of God and clearly both men and women are made in the image of God. There are times when that whole idea has been twisted and it has become the male that is thought to be made in the image of God and that somehow “man” who is male is made in image of God, but we have carefully forgotten about women; women have been given a whole new identity that is lesser and more sinister. Jesus and the gospel radically rediscovered this equality of genders, but it has taken the church a long time to take this seriously. We are all made in the image of God; God is Spirit, neither male nor female; we are made bearing the image of God; Jesus is the image of the invisible God, perfectly.

We are in the last week of Jesus’ life. Today’s story is another part of the conversation that takes place in the Temple area between Jesus and His enemies as they try to find ways of trapping Him in His words. It all goes back to the question about authority: “why should we listen to you? What authority do you have to do what you do?” This latest attempt is a question about taxes and coins. There is an uneasy alliance between the Pharisees and a group called the Herodians: the Pharisees were traditional Jews who hated the Romans, while the Herodians had an allegiance to Rome; enemies conspired together against the Son of God in this question. They butter Him up first: “*Teacher...*” (*Matthew 22:16*) and then comes the question: “*Tell us...*” (*Matthew 22:17*) As I said earlier, they thought the question had no right answer for Jesus; He was either in trouble with the people for seeming to ally Himself with the Romans; or in trouble with the Romans for encouraging people to break the tax laws. This was the poll tax, payable directly to Rome. Gotcha!

Except they hadn’t got Him. “*Whose portrait...*” (*Matthew 22:20*) “Tiberias Caesar Augustus, son of the deified Augustus, chief priest” was the inscription that offended the Jews in at least two ways: Caesar claims to be a god and to be chief priest, claims that they believe belong only to God and to the Jewish temple. So they would use the coin to pay the poll tax, but try not to handle it at any other time, because it was blasphemous. “The coin belongs to Caesar, so give it back to him in your tax; the coin is made for paying taxes” says Jesus. But then there is another image: “*Give to God what is God’s*” (*Matthew 22:21*) Is this something new? This is a deeper and bigger loyalty than paying tax to the Romans. We carry the image of God on our very being; just as the Jews owe tax to Romans, there is something we owe to God. There are different levels of loyalty and for Jesus this is the ultimate loyalty, to God. It is all about image!

The Bible tells us that we are made bearing the image of God. Every human being bears the image of God; it is part of our being human. There is a whole lot of debate as to what that means; it is not about gender! It is about who we are and the capacities we have as people,

with three in particular: worship, love, choice. These are capacities that set us apart from the rest of creation, and are particular to being human; we are made for worship, we are made for love, we are made with the capacity to make choices about good and bad.

Worship: there is part of us that is made to worship. The Catechism says: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” There is something in us that is made to recognize the greatness of God and recognise that God is worthy of praise. In human history, many have worshipped God, but others have devised substitutes: the Old Testament has its criticism of idols, statues of wood and stone before which people laid their offerings; the Romans had same set of gods; in our world, people have turned money and wealth into their ‘god’. The Bible would tell us that we owe God our worship; He has made us, we are His; He has loved us and we are His; and so for these two reasons worship is something that we should “give back” to God.

Love: part of us is made for love, to love and be loved; this is true of our human relationships and true of our relationship with God. The first quality of our relationship with God is to be love, to love the Lord, heart and soul; this love will lead us then to follow Jesus and obey; but first of all it is a relationship of love. We love God because He first loved us; we love Jesus because He first loved us. It is hard to describe what it means to love God: to see how great He is, to honour Him for all that He is, to hold Him in high esteem, to give Him a place in our hearts, to give ourselves to Him. Because we are people made in His image, we are made to love God. How quickly we forget! Love is a quality that we should “give back” to God because we are made for love of God.

Choices: Why is the world full of good things? People choose to do what is good. Why is the world so full of evil? People choose to do bad things. This is what we do. Animals act on instinct and get on with life after they make that instinctive action. We make choices between good and bad, knowing that there is a difference and then we live with the consequences – we have a bad conscience when we know we’ve done something wrong or we’ve made a mistake. We are able to make these choices and we owe it to God to do what is good and right; making right choices, doing good in the world, is something that we “give back” to God.

When Jesus says “*Give to God what is God’s*” this is what He means. We are made bearing the image of God and we are made for worship, we are made to love God, we are made to make good and right choices. This is what we were made for; this is what it means to be human. This is the fulfilment of being human and bearing the image of God, to worship God, to love the Lord, heart and soul, and to do good in the world. These are qualities that we “give back” to God.

This is a story about loyalties. The Jewish leaders were trying to put Jesus on the spot; “where do your loyalties lie? With the people? With the Romans?” Thought they had found the perfect question by which to compromise Jesus in His loyalties; He had to give an answer that promoted one loyalty at the expense of another and they were ready to pounce. The Pharisees’ loyalty was not to the Romans, certainly not! It wasn’t loyalty to God either, or else they would have recognised Jesus. It was loyalty to themselves and their place, to their position and their power, and nothing would be allowed to get in the way of that loyalty; so Jesus had to die because He questioned that place, that position, that power, their authority.

Loyalty comes in all sorts of levels:

- Loyalty to the state: I need to be a good citizen, to pay my taxes, to obey the laws of the land, to drive to the speed limit. I’m not free to disobey these laws even if I have a higher loyalty. It is not blind loyalty: I can be free to criticise the state; I cast my ballot at election time as part of that loyalty and I am free to campaign and lobby for a better state. This

loyalty to the state would cause Christians problems in the early days because it conflicted with loyalty to God; “Caesar is Lord” or “Jesus is Lord”?

- Loyalty to family: I need to be a good husband to my wife and father to my children; to be loyal to them, to care for them; I have taken vows and made promises before God to do that.
- There is a loyalty to groups of which we are a part: loyalty to the church, to other people wherever we meet them, not to gossip behind their back, but to take good part in the group, and to support other people.
- Loyalty to God, Jesus is Lord: my ultimate loyalty is to God, Jesus is Lord. What Jesus saw is that loyalty to God sums up all these others and is the best and biggest loyalty of all. Loyalty to God is no excuse to fail in my loyalties to the state (“I don’t pay taxes, I’m Christian!”) or loyalties to my family, or loyalties to other people; equally these loyalties to these others can’t be an excuse for a lack of loyalty to God. The Bible says that loyalty to God demands that I be a good citizen, that I be a good husband and father, that I be loyal to people I meet wherever I meet them.

The Jews wanted one loyalty or another: either to the Romans or to the Temple; Jesus said “both”. “Give to...” (*Matthew 22:22*) The coin was made to pay the poll tax and bore Caesar’s image. We are made bearing the image of God: we are to give back to God our worship, our love, and our doing good; this is what loyalty to God looks like.