

October 18, 2020

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 45:1-7, I Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22: 15-22

**“The Image of the Invisible God”**

Most of us have flipped a coin. Heads, we do this and tails we do that. One side of the coin usually has an image of a head on it and the other side has an image of something else. This was true even back in the first century. The coin that Jesus used in today's Gospel had an image of Caesar on it. Jesus used that image to teach an important lesson. There are also other images in today's Gospel. These images are not on coins, but they are important never the less.

It was the last Tuesday before Jesus died on the cross. Jesus was teaching in the temple during the days leading up to the Passover. The crowds were large and Jesus had been teaching in parable after parable – using them to illustrate many of the truths of heaven. Many of the parables exposed the corruption and hypocrisy among the religious leaders of that day. He was damaging their reputation – exposing their hypocrisy.

But rather than repent and amend their sinful ways, the religious leaders decided that they had to take Jesus down a notch or two. We know how desperate these leaders were because they teamed up with the Herodians.

The Herodians were people who supported the Herod family. They had supported the Herod who ordered the death of the boys in Bethlehem a year or two after Jesus was born and they supported the son of this Herod who now ruled at the time of today's Gospel.

It often surprises people to learn that the Herod's were not Jewish, but were kept in power by the military might of the Roman government. Naturally, they were big fans of the Roman occupation of Israel and so were their followers, the Herodians.

The Pharisees on the other hand, hated the Roman occupation with a passion. They saw them as an abomination that defiled the land. The fact that these two groups almost complete opposites could come together was a true sign of how desperate they were to get rid of Jesus.

Both groups came together to figure out a way to trap Jesus and so the Pharisees came up with what they thought was a fool proof plan. It used the Jewish laws and traditions as one piece of the trap and the authority of Rome as the other.

If Jesus says it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus loses with the people who consider any submission to Roman authority as against the will of God. If Jesus says it is wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, the Herodians will go to their superiors and through strict Roman Law and justice say that Jesus is a threat to the state and be arrested.

Both the Herodians and the Pharisees had the wrong image of Jesus. To the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus was considered evil. He was a threat to their religious and political security. His popularity overshadowed their popularity and they saw Jesus as simply an obstacle that had to be removed. They misunderstood His image and so they misunderstood His message.

Before we condemn the image of Jesus that the Herodians and Pharisees had, we need to look at ourselves and ask ourselves do we truly understand the image of Jesus because if we don't, then we don't understand His message.

It's easy at birth to think that any baby is and wants to be the centre of everything. Even as we grow up, we tend to want to be the image that everyone looks at. We want to project an image that everyone respects. It's very easy to have an image of ourselves that is so important, so self-consuming that it can entirely block out our image of Jesus.

There was a time that we were the image of God. The very first chapter of the Bible tells us that God created man in His own image. Adam and Eve were the pinnacle of God's creation and God described that creation with the words "very good" but it didn't take long for Adam and Eve to spoil that image.

So instead of focusing on God, they allowed Satan to convince them to focus on themselves. They were not only satisfied to be in the image of God but they wanted to actually be God, and so they spoiled the image of God in themselves and brought a curse on all of creation.

Since that time all people – Cain, the Pharisees and Herodians, you and I – have been born with our image of good and evil turned upside down. Our image of God is out of focus because sin has distorted everything.

The Pharisees and the Herodians sent their disciples in the hope that Jesus would not recognize them. In addition, these disciples presented an image of respect toward Jesus, but it was only that, an image. It was an image designed to disarm Jesus and catch Him off guard. It didn't work. Jesus was never fooled by this false and phoney image.

So Jesus turns the tables on them. Jesus understood something that they did not. That God is in control of both the civil authority and the religious authority. The physical kingdoms of power and the spiritual kingdom of grace are not an "either / or" but rather a "both / and " situation. He is in control of both kingdoms.

For example, in the Old Testament reading for today, Isaiah points out that Cyrus, a pagan king of Persian, in spite of all outward appearances, was God's instrument. The Lord was using him to work out history for the ultimate good of his people. God's image is shown here as the controller of both kingdoms, the secular and the religious. He can work with

a secular situation to help and provide a religious solution. God works in both kingdoms...the secular and the religious because they are both under His control.

When Pilate boasts of his authority either to punish Jesus or to let him go, Jesus answers him saying, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above." Proving the God is in control.

So when Jesus says, "Render to Caesar the things that Caesar's", Jesus is telling us that Caesar and all of his government is God's instrument at work in the physical world and obeying the laws of the land and participating in our democracy are all a part of our obedience to God. In both the secular and the religious, God is in control. He rules both kingdoms.

But the sad irony of today's Gospel is that even though the Herodians and the Pharisees were awe-struck by the elegance of Jesus' answer, they did not stick around to hear what else He had to say. All they did was to leave Him and go away.

Now if they would have followed Jesus, they would have encountered another image because you see Jesus is also the image of the invisible God, and nowhere else do we see that image more clearly than when we look at the cross.

As we look at the Christ as He hangs on the cross, all of a sudden our up-side-down, out-of-focus image of God becomes right-side-up and crystal clear. It is on the cross that the Son of Man is glorified. It is in this act of selfless love that we see the true image of God.

And in the image of God nailed to the cross is the ultimate reality of what we truly are. We are born of the flesh of Adam. We are sinners and in our sin we want to be like gods, deciding for ourselves what is good and what is evil. We like the Pharisees and the Herodians, would love to compartmentalize God and simply put Him in a box where we would restrict him to only religious things and ban him from the secular parts of our lives.

But God is bigger than that and many times we can miss the big picture of why He came. He came to save us from our sin in love for us all Jesus has chosen to take in our place. He takes it to the cross – His death for our life, His damnation for our salvation. The blessed exchange, His perfect life for our imperfect life, God's forgiveness for our sinfulness is the clearest image of the invisible God.

It may be an image that the world sees as defeat, but in fact, what He did on the cross is a victory for our salvation by God. It is by this victory that even though we die, we shall rise again. For Jesus Himself did not remain in the grave, but became the first fruits of those who rise from the dead. His resurrection is the assurance that the image of our Saviour on the cross is the image of victory.

On the cross, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews is, for us, the image of the invisible God who loves us and gave up everything even His own life so that we could be saved. In that image you see what the God of the universe has done for make you his own. Romans 8 says it the best, "God who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?"

That's why Jesus came. To give us life and life to the full. Heaven is our home and eternity gives us a life that is perfect, without sin, without suffering and without death. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.