

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, Christ the light of the world and the Holy Spirit, giver of wisdom and illumination. AMEN.

Today's Gospel reading comes from a long back and forth between Jesus, and the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees in the Jerusalem Temple during holy week. The week leading to his death and resurrection. The stakes are high. Jesus has gathered large crowds who are hanging on his every word. The religious leaders are getting more and more alarmed as they suspect the bad guys in the parables of Jesus are in fact themselves.

We enter the story today just as the Pharisees have enlisted the Herodians in their cause. It's a strange partnership; the two groups didn't like each other at all. The Herodians are supporters of Herod, the puppet King of Israel who owes his throne and allegiance to Rome. Herodians therefore, would have a great investment in obeying Roman laws and paying Roman taxes. Then we have the Pharisees, who, as religious purists, would object strongly to paying taxes to any pagan king and especially to a king who, like Caesar, claimed to be of divine lineage. These particular Pharisees think of a clever trap which will end badly for Jesus no matter how he answers. Or so they think. First, they start by buttering him up, "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." I'm sure the first part was either just a tad sarcastic or stuck in their throats. But the second part "you show deference to no one" was easy to say, for Jesus certainly has not shown them any deference!

Now they lay their trap. "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says no, then the Herodians will accuse him of treason to Caesar. If he says yes then the Pharisees can discredit him as a false teacher and he will also alienate the people. Jesus neatly turns the tables

and uses the opportunity to do some teaching. He asks for the coin used for the tax. This is the first, often overlooked, part of his response. Just a day or so before this encounter Jesus chased the moneychangers out of the outer courts of the temple. These moneychangers had a business because one was required to exchange pagan currency for Temple coins before going to do business in the Temple. They just weren't supposed to do this inside the Temple courts. Carrying the image of Caesar into the Temple was like carrying in an image of an idol, especially as we have already noted, Caesar claims divine lineage. But note that when Jesus asks for a denarius, one is quickly located and handed to him.

When he is given the coin Jesus asks, "Whose image is this, and whose title?" They answered, "Caesar's." Well then if the money is Caesar's, then give it back to him! The NRSV does a couple of translations which may not give the best insight into the words of Jesus here. One is the word "give" the Greek has a more complex meaning which is more like "give back." And that is what Jesus is saying here. Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. And give to God what is God's. Jesus has clearly established what is Caesar's, but what is God's? What do we give to God? This text is often used to talk about stewardship in terms of what you give to the church. But this isn't a passage on tithing.

The other questionable translated word is "head" rather than "**image**", for the Greek word here is *ikon*. And that's important. This is the same word used in the Septuagint in Gen 1:27. The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures written some 250 years before Jesus. It is most likely that Jesus and his followers were very familiar with the Septuagint. Gen 1:27 reads "So God created humans in his **image**, in the **image of God** he created them; male and female he created them."

So, what do we give to God? What is God's image stamped on? What bears his image and is made for his purpose? Well, that's us, humanity, each and every one of us. Furthermore, at our baptism we are marked, we are stamped, we are inscribed, with the sign of the cross. Our image and likeness, and what is written upon us, is that of God himself. We belong to God; we are his beloved children. As I said before, this isn't a passage on tithing. This is a passage on wholehearted surrender to God who created you and redeemed you, and who wants to transform you.

Our first reading this morning puts a sharper edge on that question. Moses is on the mountain, and he wants to see God. He asks for it plainly — show me your glory. And God says no. "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Yet just a few verses earlier, the very same chapter tells us that "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." Face to face. And then, a moment later, no face at all. How do we hold those two together?

Some try to smooth it over by insisting that the Lord's "face" was never a physical thing in the first place — just a figure of speech, a stand-in for God's presence. Nyasha Junior suggests we not tie ourselves in those knots. She writes that "without resorting to such contortions, one can simply acknowledge that the texts offer multiple and conflicting traditions regarding the Lord and the form that he takes."¹ In other words, Scripture itself carries more than one memory of how God was encountered. Moses may have seen the face of God. And Moses may not have. The tradition holds both, and it does not pretend otherwise.

¹ Nyasha Junior, "Exodus," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom (London: SPCK, 2012), 65.

But look at what Israel did with that uncertainty. They did not carve an image. They did not cast one in gold or paint one on a wall. Where every neighbouring nation had its statues and its shrines and its gods you could walk up to and touch, Israel had none. And the reason is not that God was too distant to picture. The reason is that God had already made an image, and it was not made of wood or stone. It was standing there in the crowd. It was you. It was your neighbour.

And this is exactly what Paul finds in Thessalonica. He writes to that young church and describes what happened when they received the good news. They “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” Turned. Away from idols. Toward a living God. That language would have landed like thunder in Thessalonica — a city full of statues and shrines, of emperors claiming divine status and temples demanding allegiance. Paul is telling them what Jesus is showing us in the temple. There is only one image that matters, and only one loyalty that holds. Caesar can keep his coin. But you — you bear the image of the living God. You do not belong to the empire. You belong to God.

A community that believes this stops trying to shrink God down to something it can manage. It stops refashioning God in its own preferred image — which is the oldest idolatry there is — and starts looking instead. Looking for the face of God in the person beside it, in the stranger, in the one it would rather write off. And it keeps looking, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, until looking becomes a habit and the habit becomes a life.

This faith community of St. Mary's has been giving themselves back to God for 153 years. Through good times and bad, sickness and health, through broken and healed relationships, through countless births, baptisms, confirmation classes, weddings, and funerals. Through bible studies, Parish

council meetings, blackberry festivals, Sunday mornings and Friday nights. This community continues to trust in the Creator God's love for them and all his beloved children.

This God, this Creator God, desires you to turn to him, to be enveloped in his loving arms, to be filled to overflowing with his grace and infinite compassion and mercy, to be healed of your wounds and griefs. This God wants you to delight in him as he delights in you. Give back to God that which is God's. Give yourself, your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength, your weakness, your wounds, your sorrows, your joys, yourself.

AMEN.