

Coop's Scoops #79 Liturgy and Sermon for Sunday, July 26th 2020

Preface: Sometimes the Revised Common Lectionary “repeats” itself by having two Sundays with essentially the same readings, seeking a different focus on particular portions of those readings. Last week, we focussed on the parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, and rather than re-do that with a different slant this Sunday, I have chosen to select alternative readings and sermon.)

Opening Sentence: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! John 6:68

Readings: Leviticus 19: 9-15 Psalm 146 1 Timothy 6: 17-19

Collect: **O God,** the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy, increase and multiply upon us your mercy, that with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. (This collect could be an awesome daily prayer during this time of pandemic...things temporal ...encouraging us to focus on things eternal...lest we despair.)

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22: 15-22

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax^[a] to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Sermon:

The Fraser Institute’s recent report notes that on average Canadians pay 42.5% of their income in ALL forms of taxes. That can cause a lot of grumbling to be sure, mostly around April...but we do at least get a return for that money: Health care, education, Highways, Policing and Fire and Ambulance services, OAS. People in Jesus’ time paid about 50% to just maintain the status quo. Taxation was always a hot topic around Jerusalem. And this tax, the denarius, was especially problematic, as it was an Imperial tax on occupied peoples, not a tax on Roman citizens.

When the religious leaders asked some spies to go and “get” Jesus somehow, those spies knew just where to start. Jesus was ready for them. The scene is set. He is downtown, surrounded by pilgrims and new-ish believers and soldiers. If He was the type of Messiah who liked to start riots, there would be no better time. He is asked a loaded, no-win, question: “Is it right for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” If He says “don’t pay it”, He is in big trouble with Rome. If He says’ “Yes, God wants you to pay it” He is in very big trouble with the people. Drum roll! Matthew doesn’t keep us in suspense for His answer. *“But (Jesus) perceived their craftiness and said to them, ‘Show me a denarius.’ Whose head and whose title does it bear?’ They said to him, ‘The emperor’s.’ Jesus said to them, “Then give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and give to God the things that are God’s.” A perfectly brilliant answer, right?*

Yes, genius level right! You gotta love it. But it is actually way more than that. Jesus’ words are more than clever, more than just a good riposte for us to admire. His words are gracious, even though the spy delegation is looking for blood. Despite their total lack of sincerity, Jesus does not call them out. He knows that the only thing they really want to give to the Emperor is Himself...to die for

treason. So Jesus calmly gives them a truthful, wise, and totally unimpeachable answer...turns the tables completely. It is the perfect answer.

And I believe it is moreover a **prescriptive** answer. What is that? A prescription...like doctor fills out. Jesus in His answer is not speaking to just back there and back then, He is giving a prescription for Kingdom Health in the here and now and forever. He is telling us what His Kingdom is to look like and how His people are to act while they are in this world. **So just what does “give to the Emperor those things that are Emperor's and give to God the things that are God's” mean for the church today?**

Let's start with two things the answer probably **does NOT mean, and then move on to two things it just might.** First of all, it is not about list-making. We're probably not supposed to sit down and ponder, "Okay, what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God?" Lots of people have tried to make that list. Monday to Saturday belong to the world, Sundays belong to God. Or money from my salary can go to God, but I'm keeping whatever I win at the casino.. We are dual citizens of heaven and earth, and we may be tempted to figure out how much time or money to spend in each place. If we try to rip ourselves in half, or quarters, or whatever, we've already lost the spiritual battle. As that same genius teacher Jesus of Nazareth told us, "You cannot serve two masters...for you will end up loving one and hating the other." This serving of two Masters sadly happens sometimes when churches struggle with finances. God's economy says "You have freely received, so freely give...I will see to it that you have everything you need to be generous." But the World's economy soon creeps in when **someone brave** almost always suggests: "Why don't we launch a visitation campaign, hit every household where anybody in five generations was baptized or married or buried, guilt out the nominal Anglicans in town and convince them all they have to do their bit – particularly the wealthy ones –if they won't come to church they can at least send a cheque." Now those exact words are never said...and seldom deeply felt, but they are sometimes implied. And picked up by the culture. We can wind up giving people the impression that GOD needs their money. That they'd somehow be doing Him a favour by ante-ing up to the building fund. "Leadership Journal" once published a great cartoon. A woman draped in jewellery and wearing a luxurious fur coat is seated across the desk

from a pastor. "Reverend," she says, "I was hoping I could let you vacation in my Florida condo this year, and then God and I could call it even." God has never worked that way. He doesn't want us to pay taxes to Him, or anything else to Him, in return for some divine safety net.

The second thing that Jesus Is NOT saying is that there is no conflict between following Him and being obedient citizens. The Gospel of Luke in particular tells the story of Jesus as a story of a clash of kingdoms. It all begins with a clash. Jesus is born in Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus needed to know how many people there were so he could tax all of them. Consider Mary the mother of Jesus proclaiming: "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the humble and meek." That's more than a tad political. John the Baptist is thrown into jail for confronting Herod about his unlawful marriage. There are more examples, but you get the picture. When we seriously try to give God the things that are God's, there will be consequences. And they won't all be comfy.

Now we consider what Jesus answer does say to the Church today. Perhaps this. **First**, Jesus seems to be reminding us that although the Kingdom has come, or has at least come nearer, it has not come to overthrow the world as it is by force. At least not yet. Jesus prayed for those left here when He left. Those who had to stay to fulfill His mission. Believers are in the world for the long haul. We are not exempt from what other people go through... whether pandemics, sickness, temptation, war, social injustice or yes, paying taxes. Even wearing masks if the governing authorities say so! Imagine that.

Second, we are to know that when and if Christ and the Empire ask us to choose between them, then God has to win, every time. In Acts chapter 5, an emboldened Peter facing condemnation declares this: "*We must obey God rather than any human authority.*" So while we're not to go around picking fights, if a fight comes to us, we do what God says. What we believe He would have us do.

As we close, I want to remind you that way back in the beginning God had something to say to us about all of this. In the Creation story, we are told that God's image is stamped on us. The denarius was made in the image of Caesar, we are made in the image of God. Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when He gave his answer to those tricky spies. And the greatest worship we can ever offer to God

is, as Paul writes in Romans, to present Him with ourselves...the “me” in each of us...our very bodies as a living sacrifice. We are His, after all.

So in this Gospel passage full of deceit, trickery, genius, danger and a looming cross, God’s claim upon us, and God’s grace toward us is THE BEST part of the Good News. Amen.



An Imperial Denarius in Caesar’s time

Prayer for the Day:

O God, our Creator and our Father, it is you who gave us life. Please teach us how to use life. Help us to think not of how much we can get out of life, but how much we can put into it; not of how much we can take, but of how much we can give; not of money as something to spend on ourselves alone; but of how much we can share with others; not of the number of people we can use, but of the number of people to whom we can be of use. Help us always to trust in Your care and live generously in spirit and in deed as we follow Jesus. Amen (William Barclay)

Blessing: (a traditional Irish blessing)

May there always be work for your hands to do.

May your purse always hold a coin or two.

May the sun always shine upon your window pane.

May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.

May the hand of a friend always be near to you and

May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.

Amen. All praise to God! Amen.