

Whose Image?

Matthew 22:15-33

“Give to the emperor that which is the emperor’s and to God that which is God’s.”

This is a saying that challenges and unsettles the uneasy truces we sometimes forge between our faith and our politics.

In Australia, we are mostly agreed on the need to keep religion and politics separate in the leadership of our country. History has taught us that when the church holds political power bad things happen and the church becomes corrupted by the lure of building its own kingdom, and distracted from the work of God’s kingdom.

The Spanish Inquisition or the years of bloodshed following the Reformation in Europe are just two of the big signposts from history saying, “Wrong Way! Go Back!”

We see similar warning signs when other religions wield supreme political power. There is no worse tyrant than a tyrant who claims to be doing God’s will.

But does that mean that individual Christians should stay out of politics?

Does it mean we should have no political opinions and should never use our influence for political purposes that we believe align with the gospel?

What do you think?

How have you navigated that territory between your faith and your politics?

I won’t ask you to call out your answers now, but I wonder how you would feel about having a conversation over a cup of tea about the ways that the teachings of Jesus have informed your political engagement.

Some of you might enjoy that but I’m guessing others would find it really uncomfortable. Perhaps you have had such conversations in the past that have turned nasty, and you don’t want to go there again? Of perhaps you have just been told so many times that there are three subjects you must never raise in polite society, and two of them are politics and religion.

But if we never talk about it, how are we to support each other in living faithfully in that space?

When Jesus said “give to the emperor that which is the emperor’s and to God that which is God’s”, was he declaring an eternal separation of politics from religion?

Pay your taxes on what you earn through the week. Go to church on Sundays. That will keep God and the emperor happy and all will be well.

That’s kind of neat.

The only problem is that it is pretty much the opposite of what Jesus was saying.

Jesus illustrated his point with a coin.

I happen to have one here.

Whose head is on it?

In the Roman world, having the image of the emperor on coins was a relatively new innovation. Their coins had usually featured the heads of their gods.

Jews, of course, refused to acknowledge any god but Yahweh, and they did not draw or sculpt images of God and *their* coins did not have heads on them. Coins that did have a human or divine image on them could not be used at the temple. That is why there were money changers in the temple courtyards.

Roman currency did circulate in Judea, though, and was used to pay for things like the Roman taxes – which is why someone Jesus was talking to happened to have one in their pocket.

So, Roman coins had gods and goddesses imprinted on them, up until Julius Caesar. He wanted to make a lasting impression on the Roman world, so he put his own head on one side of his coins and the goddess Venus on the other side. His face in the hand of every shopper in every market throughout his dominions said very clearly: you might never see me in person, but don't you ever forget who's in charge.

Julius Caesar was declared to be a god after his death, and so was his adopted son, Augustus. The coin that Jesus held in his hand probably had on it the head of Augustus' stepson, Tiberius, who could claim to be the son and the grandson of a god.

By the time this Gospel was written, Roman emperors had started demanding to be worshipped as gods while they were still alive. Why wait until you are dead to become a god?! Where's the fun in that?

So, if you had suggested to a Roman that they should keep religion and politics separate, they would have had no idea what you were talking about. Their leaders were gods. Politics *was* religion. And religion *was* politics. There was no separation.

And to Jews, who had no god but the one true God, when they were living in a world in which their foreign masters were declared to be gods when they died, keeping religion and politics separate would have been even more meaningless. Their faith demanded that they reject political leaders who claimed to be gods.

So... some Pharisees tried to get Jesus in trouble, by asking:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

According to the contemporary historian Josephus there was a groundswell of Galileans who were claiming that paying taxes to the emperor amounted to blasphemy because it implied submission to the emperor as king, when their only king was God. It makes perfect sense that they would have thought that way.

It was in this tense political and religious environment that Jesus is asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Of course, nobody likes paying taxes, but in a democracy where taxes are used to pay for things like roads and schools and hospitals, most of us agree that taxes are necessary.

The Gospels take us to a very different world.

The people asking the question about taxes wanted to make trouble for Jesus with a gotcha question. Whichever way he answered he would be in trouble.

No doubt, the questioners would have made sure some particularly rough Galileans were nearby, with their large muscles and sharp knives, ready to use violence if Jesus said yes.

On the other hand, there would also have been a few Roman soldiers nearby with their big muscles and sharp swords, who would have been all too happy to arrest Jesus for treason if Jesus said “no”.

The trap was well set.

There was no answer Jesus could give without severe and immediate consequences.

Or so it seemed.

But Jesus was clever.

He took a coin and said ‘Who’s head is this’. They said, “the emperor”.

OK then, *Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s*.

These words were deliberately open to a range of interpretations. At the more radical end of the spectrum of interpretations, we find suggestions by Gospel scholars like NT Wright – someone with a solid understanding of first century history. He suggests that when Jesus said

Give to the emperor that which is the emperor’s

He may well have been hinting: “Give the Emperor what he has coming to him.”¹

Give him what he deserves. Let the hearer judge for him or herself what that might be.

Many of those hearers thought they knew exactly what this tyrant deserved.

That’s the more radical interpretation that Jesus left open in his words. The slightly softer, more subversive, possibility is this:

The emperor has asserted his ownership over the empire’s currency by putting his image on it. Ok then. Let him have his money.

Let go of your need for money; let go of what seems necessary for your survival. The emperor wants it. Let him have it.

¹ Jesus and the Victory of God, page 502ff

This is a call to freedom. It is a call to empty our hands of the things that control us, to live simple, humble lives so that we cannot be controlled by tyrants who use money to enslave us.

When Jesus said these things, he was within a week of dying at the hands of that emperor's representative. The emperor's representative asserted the right to take Jesus' life and Jesus said, "OK, you can have it". He gave to the emperor what the emperor demanded. And when he did this, he wasn't just asserting his own freedom, he was setting us all free from all sorts of tyranny.

But Jesus didn't stop there. The next point was the real punchline.

*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, **and to God the things that are God's.***

The emperor's image was on a coin. Where do we find God's image?

God doesn't need coins. Human beings are God's image.

ou. Me. Every one of us.

If I am to give to God the things that are God's, I will give God my very self. My whole self. Everything I am.

Not only that.

Every other human being is the image of God. So I will not use other people to serve my own interests. I will not use them to further my own agendas. I will leave them in God's gentle hands.

Understanding this has changed the world – many times. Belief that all people are made in God's image fired the movement to abolish slavery. And it still does.

One human being cannot own another, because both are the image of God.

[That is the point of the next conversation Jesus had, and is, I think why the author put these stories together: the strange scenario about a woman who is married to seven brothers in turn.](#) The Sadducees came to Jesus with outspoken cynicism about the possibility of resurrection, and *also* with an unspoken assumptions about a woman being the property of her husband. If the resurrection were real, they assume, the wife will remain the property of her husband for all eternity. Jesus dismissed both the outspoken cynicism and the unspoken assumption. God's eternal purposes for humanity do not allow for the ownership of one person by another. All are the image of God: women and men equally.

We belong to God. Nobody else. And those people who seem to have so much power over us – whether they be family members or politicians - only have power over the little stuff – like money. They can never control the important things like our hearts and minds. And no matter how great their power over us is, it ceases at the point of our death.

So, when we feel ourselves to be threatened by any sort of tyrant, we can remember Jesus saying, "Give to the emperor that which is the emperor's and to God that which is God's". When we repeat those words we might mean, "God, please give tyrants what they have coming to them!" but we can mean "tyrants can stamp their image on coins, they can stamp their image on the internet, on buildings and news outlets, but they will never stamp their image on me! I bear God's image and no other!"

And if we believe that, then it will have implications for our politics and for everything else in our lives.

So, may you know in every fibre of your being that you belong to God, and to nobody else. Amen

However you feel this morning
And whatever pressure you are under
May you know that you are treasured by God
And that you, in your unique way,
remind the world that God's loving reign is stronger than every tyranny
will outlast every empire
And will bring us all into the eternal reign of peace
In the presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen