

October 22, 2017
Pentecost 20
Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-13 (the inspiration for "Joy To the World")
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22
Religion and Politics – Jazz Vespers
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In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Politics and religion. Religion and politics. The two subjects that were once taboo in polite conversation. No one talked about how they voted. Everyone complained about paying taxes, but no one admitted how much they paid, or didn't pay! The world in which Jesus lived was only remotely like ours. No one at that time could have imagined "separation of church and state". Politics and religion were inextricably entwined with each other.

Jesus ministry had political as well as religious implications. That's why the religious leaders and the political powers found him so threatening that they wanted him dead.

This week's Gospel is more than just a clever coin trick. It represents a clash of empires and expectations. The questions it raises have little to do with paying taxes to the government. It has everything to do with what we consider and accept as the coin of the realm. When Jesus asked the Pharisees to bring him the coin they used to pay taxes it probably bore the image of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. One typical coin in circulation from that time had an impression of Tiberius on the front and Caesar Augustus' wife Livia depicted as the goddess of peace on the back.

This coin made both a political and religious statement. Its image was of a god who claimed ultimate power, which, according to the Jewish law, was idolatry. The religious and political leaders tried to trap Jesus into making a claim about religion and politics. Instead, Jesus traps the Pharisees in their own rules. He calls into question their loyalty to the very God they claimed to honor by fastidiously following the rules. Jesus challenges the Pharisees to answer deeper questions: "Who do you Pharisees really worship? Who really is your god? Who do you really think the world belongs to?"

These are good questions for us to consider too!

Some Christians today would suggest that the community of faith should have nothing to say about politics. They maintain that faith is about our personal relationship with Jesus, and should have nothing to say about our governmental life of the world. Others would have us believe that unless we are marching in the streets we are ignoring God's call to act with justice and love mercy.

Must we choose one or the other? Jesus' response to the Pharisees reminds them, and us that God is the God of heaven AND earth. Everything private and public, personal and communal, belongs to God. If our faith has nothing to say about our public life, then we may want to consider the depth and breadth of our faith. We might want to ask if our silence is reducing our God to an image on a coin.

The coin of the realm of God does not bear the imprint of Washington or Franklin or Hamilton, it bears the imprint of Jesus. It bears the image of Jesus on a cross. It bears the image of the broken seal on the empty tomb. It bears the imprint of the One who, in great love, paid the tax of human violence, hatred, brokenness, pain and suffering in full. It bears the imprint of the One who has always walked beside those who suffer and with anyone who walks alongside the suffering of our world today. For us, the coin of the realm is the Love of the God of heaven and earth, the compassion of God's Son, and the enduring and eternal life which he offers free to everyone.

So, I wonder, what coin do we have in our pockets? Whose image is on your coin these days?

Religion and politics, politics and religion. Jesus says “give to the Emperor that which belongs to Emperor. And give to God the things that are God's! So what do you have that belongs to God. Is it only the left-over change we put in the offering plate or does it begin with our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus who gave up His life out of deep love for all of creation? Jesus invites us to be honest about whose empire we serve and whose economy we trade in. While this text is not instructive of how we are to live in a complex world of competing loyalties – God or government – Instead, it shines a light on the distinction between what belongs to Caesar – and some things do – and what belongs to God.

You belong to God. Created in God's image, deeply loved beyond your imagining. Stretch out your hands let God's love surround you in heaven and on earth. In religion and in politics.

Amen.