

Our gospel passage today is found in the section of the Gospel of Matthew that tells the story of Jesus' confrontation with the rulers and religious leaders of Jerusalem in the temple—just a few days before he went to the cross. In the passage this morning they use a simple question to trap Jesus.

The question as a weapon is one of the oldest techniques in debate. The art is to find the question to which there is no acceptable answer, meaning any response digs the person answering into a deeper and deeper hole. This, of course, changes the whole nature and purpose of a question, since the point of most questions is to get an answer to something we don't already know, which makes us in some sense dependent on the one answering, but the point of an unanswerable question is to change the power dynamics, putting the one asking the question in a position of power.

The Pharisees are confident that they have found the perfect question to ask Jesus. Whichever way he answers, he'll alienate some of his followers, and that is exactly what the Pharisees want: they want to erode Jesus' power base, without dirtying their own hands. So, they reckon, if Jesus says that taxes should be paid to the illegal Roman invader, he will anger those of his followers who hope and believe that he is the Messiah, the one who reassert God's direct rule over his people, and gets rid of the Romans. But if he tries to please that group by saying that taxes should be withheld, he will be liable for arrest by the civil powers, and he will frighten off the ordinary people, who want no trouble with the authorities, but who only come to Jesus to hear about God and to find consolation and healing. 'Got him!' the Pharisees snigger. But of course we know that Jesus is all too aware of their thoughts.

Jesus' response to the religious leaders about paying taxes to Caesar stands as one of the most important principles for Christians living in this world until the Lord returns. 'Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's; and unto God the things that are God's'. Jesus is not saying that life is to be divided into two compartments, with obligations to Caesar and to God separated from each other. Both Caesar and the kingdom of God have rights, but the way of fulfilling our obligations to earthly authorities is by first fulfilling our obligations to God.

As citizens of this country, we have obligations to the government and to one another and even if we don't enjoy these duties, most of us recognise their importance and are very careful to keep them. We are careful to vote; and we are careful to respond when called upon to perform jury service; and we're

careful to pay our taxes. And of course, we're always grateful for those who put their lives on the line to protect our freedom by enlisting in the armed forces or the police.

But what about our even greater obligations to God? Are we as careful to render to him the things that we owe to him as we are to render our obligations to our government? How careful are we to even know what it is that God says we owe him? And what does it say about us when we are so concerned to carefully perform the duties that an earthly, human government obligates us to, while almost completely ignoring the even greater duties and obligations that almighty God demands of us?

This morning's passage touches on this whole matter. We should, of course, be very careful to perform our duties as citizens of the earthly government in which God has placed us. But we should be even more careful to perform the greater duties and obligations we owe to the God of the universe—the God who made us for Himself, in his own image.

By highlighting the physical features of the denarius used to pay the tax, Jesus gives us a number of things to think about. In the first place, the image of the emperor stamped into the coin's surface, along with the blasphemous inscription with its claim to divinity, call to mind the prohibition against images in Exodus 20:4, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth'. By pointing out that his opponents possess and display such an object within the Temple grounds, Jesus seems to raise, not lower, the stakes of the conversation about money and human loyalty. The issue at stake here is nothing less than idolatry. (And this is not a problem that we can solve simply by printing different words on our currency -- even words that confess our trust in God.)

Likewise, when we think about Jesus highlighting the physicality of that denarius -- the coin stamped out by human hands for human purposes, and the image of Caesar imprinted on it -- it's hard to ignore the connection to those words from the beginning of Genesis, verse 26, about what God said the first time God stamped out a human being: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness".

Confronted with the question of human loyalty and the coin bearing the image of the earthly emperor, it's easy to picture Jesus flipping that coin in his hand a

few times, and then tossing it casually aside. In my imagination I see his eyes rising to meet those of his opponents, confronting each of them with an unspoken question hanging in the air: “And you, my friend: Whose image do you bear?”

One thing, at least, seems clear: Jesus is not solving the dilemma by carving out separate domains of human loyalty. For every character in the story, and for each of us who still bother to read and ponder it, one absolute commitment subsumes all other commitments. As Christians our commitment is to model ourselves on Christ, becoming more like him as we grow in faith; our commitment is to seek God’s will for our lives, to use the gifts he has given us in his service; our commitment is to take the Good News of the Gospel into our broken world so that all may know the love of God.

Whatever we render unto Caesar, or to the retirement fund, or in the collection plate at church, we can never afford to forget this: we belong entirely to God. We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance. The coin of our realm bears the image of our monarchs, but each of us bears another. Our Emperor said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”. We must never forget to render unto God the things that are God’s. In Jesus’ name, Amen.