



Sermon: - 22nd October 2017

In whose image?

Exodus 33: 12-23; Matthew 22: 15-22

Do you remember those “fake news” headlines from some years ago? “Freddie Starr ate my hamster!” Or “World War 2 bomber found on the moon!” They’re the kind of thing that stop you in your tracks, make you think, “did I read that properly?” And sometimes, even though you might not want to admit it, even to yourself, make you want to read on. It’s a hook. And journalists are very good at creating a hook, the headline which might have nothing to do with the actual story. Journalists are trained in asking questions in such a way that people are trapped into giving an answer which is fodder for an attention-grabbing headline.

One such question, an old chestnut, and this is actually used in media training, is, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” It’s a loaded question. A journalist’s trick. There is no right answer. If the answer is yes, the headline will be, “Mr X admits to beating his wife!” If the answer is no, the headline will be, “Mr X admits to still beating his wife!” It was this sort of question that Jesus was faced with that day in Jerusalem.

“Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” On first sight, this seems a straightforward question. We have to pay our taxes, don’t we? But it was, in fact, a loaded question. For Jesus, facing this group of people, there was no right answer. There were two groups of people present when this question was asked. There were the Pharisees, who were against the Roman government of occupation, but because they wanted to trip Jesus up, they brought along the Herodians. The Herodians were a group of people who supported Herod and were grateful to Rome because it was Roman power that kept Herod in power, so each of these groups wanted a different answer and Jesus was in a lose/lose situation! On the one hand, if he says that it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he alienates the people who hate the Roman occupation and its Caesar. The coin in question bore the image of the Roman Emperor and the inscription on it referred to the Emperor as, “the son of the Divine Augustus Caesar”. For a devout Jew, to pay tribute to someone who claims to be a deity would be deeply offensive, and indeed blasphemous and Jesus would lose all his credibility as a rabbi if he condoned this. However, if Jesus says it is unlawful to pay taxes, the people will be pleased, but Jesus will then be liable for arrest by the Romans. It was, as you would expect, illegal not to pay

taxes to Rome. And although many Judeans might affect sympathy with Jesus if he had suggested that taxes should be withheld, there was, as always, those who were collaborators and sympathisers with the Roman occupation, and as we have already noted they were present in the crowd. In other words, if Jesus said, "don't pay your taxes," he'd be in trouble with the law, and if he said, "pay your taxes," he'd be in trouble with devout Jews. He's stuck between a rock and a hard place, whatever he says he is in trouble.

As we would expect, however, Jesus manages to convert a lose/lose situation into a win/win situation. The coin bears the image of Caesar. This is one of the reasons there were money changers in the temple. Do you remember that incident where Jesus overturns the money changers tables? These coins were not acceptable to the Jews and so Jews going to the temple to worship had to change them into their own currency

before they could make their offerings and the money changers were cheating them which is what made Jesus angry. These are Roman coins and so there is no problem in giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. The answer is clear, pay your taxes. But then, Jesus goes on to say that they should give to God what belongs to God. The coin is stamped with the likeness of Caesar, and so it is offered to Caesar, but where do we find something which is stamped with the image of God? What is it that we are expected to offer to God?

You will have gathered from our little drama before the sermon that the answer to that question is that humanity is stamped with the image of God, as this little section of the image from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel illustrates. We are, of course, made in his image. In one sense we are all made, each of us individually, in the image of God in that we are individually loving, as he is, we are individually creative, as he is, we are only fully ourselves, our true and individual selves, when we are in a relationship with others, as he is. But in another sense, we are made in the image of God, not as individuals, rather it takes the whole of humanity to represent the face of God. And that is rather significant when we consider Jesus' instruction to give to God that which belongs to God.

In the first place, it means that each of us as individuals belong to God, belong to the people of God, the body of Christ here in this place. We belong and the only way we will stop belonging is if we turn our backs on him. That means that we are called to offer him our work and worship, our love and loyalty, our service and our commitment, each of us as an individual. We are to give to God what belongs to God, our lives. Which means that as we go about our daily lives we do so as children of God, we live as Christians, we interact

with others as Christians, we are the face of God to all those whom we meet on a daily basis.

But more than that - we bear God's image in every situation, and into every situation, in which we live and function – every event, whether it's social, economic, political, or religious. In all these aspects of life we belong to God and our religious affiliation is the most important thing about us. It comes before anything else. Whatever we do, the most important thing about how we do it, is that we belong to God. In other words, our primary loyalty doesn't change when we move out of church and into the polling booth. The fact that we are Christians should infect and affect everything that we do.

But it also means that collectively we belong to God. And this puts a different slant on "giving to God what belongs to God".

Perhaps there is a clue in the Exodus passage as to what that might mean. Here we see Moses in the presence of God, but not allowed to look on the face of God. It would have been too much for him. God's goodness, his presence, his glory, would be overwhelming. Even having been in the presence of God, looking at God's back, caused Moses' face to glow with a reflection of God's glory, a pale reflection, but even at that, such a glowing reflection that the Israelites could not bear to look on him and he had to veil his face. The face of God glows, the face of God has power, the face of God represents everything that is good, the face of God changes things for the better.

So, will if we collectively represent the face of God, what does that mean? Could it mean that we too have power, that we too represent everything that is good, and is it possible that we too could glow with love, and that we too could change things for the better? And if we did, wouldn't that make a huge difference to those we encounter, just as Moses' encounter with God made a huge difference to him and also to the Israelites? What if, when those outside the church looked at those of us inside the church, when we are all gathered together, it was, in a sense, too much for them? What if God's glory so shone from us, that they could hardly bear to look at us? What if that transformational face of God, the face that changes things for the better, was something that we brought to this world, and this place?

Can we do that? Can that happen? I believe it can if we, like Moses, allow ourselves to gaze upon God. If we continually open up our lives to him, if we spend time with him, if we realise the truth that when we come into his presence even although we can't physically

see him, we can sense him; I suppose we might say that we can see his back. He is here, now, with us, glory veiled, but none the less real. As we become aware of that and look at him with worship, our faces change to bear more clearly the image of his face... which we then take out into the world. And the more we open ourselves up to God's presence as we sit here in his presence the more real that presence becomes. So this reflection of the image of God is not something we do as individuals, rather it takes all of us to be the face of God in this place, in this community.

It takes (name names) – we are all needed to represent God. Let's gaze upon the face of God this morning. Let's open our hearts and let him in so that as we leave this place our faces glow with the love of the living God that others might look on us, and see, and know.