

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" <sup>21</sup>They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

**SECOND READING:** Isaiah 49:15-16

Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these might forget,

yet I will not forget you. <sup>16</sup>See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your ways are continually before me.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

### *“In the Image”*

Growing up with three sisters, I have memories of good times when we all got along, and I have memories of when we didn't too. Often our battles were about possession...of things. And because there came a time when the older three of us were all wearing the same, or near-sized clothes, and because Mom would often buy multiples of a particular item of clothing that was a good buy at the store, arguments would break out over whose dress was whose, over whose sweater belonged to whom or whose socks were in the clean clothes basket. But my mother anticipated these scuffles and was prepared. She'd settle things by telling us to check the initials in the inside collar or the waistband or whatever. And sure enough, there'd be an "N", "A" or "W", for Naomi, Amy or Wendy, and the fight was over. The initials of our names proved to whom it belonged.

It was a wise move and good survival tool for the mother of four girls. It was the same insight revealed by Jesus in today's gospel message, when the Herodians and Pharisees tried to ensnare him. Let's back up and look at the bigger picture. Earlier in the week, Jesus had entered Jerusalem on a donkey, and was hailed as Savior and King by an adoring, palm-waving crowd. Then he entered the Temple and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers. And following this, he admonished the religious leaders through the telling of parables. He did not go easy with his words. All of this was making the leaders very nervous. They saw Jesus as dangerous, a threat to them and their power. Two groups that normally wanted little to do with each other, the Herodians and the Pharisees, declared a temporary truce in order to together trap Jesus. (I think we're seeing some of that going on these days...usual enemies teaming up together to fight a common one). The Pharisees ultimately planned to kill Jesus.

The question they posed on this day was very clever. They asked Jesus whether it was lawful to pay the poll or imperial tax. Palestine, you remember, was a colony of the Roman Empire. The Jews were being asked to pay taxes which supported the Roman army and government, those forces which occupied their country! The Herodians were allied with Herod Antipas, who had been named king of the Jews by Rome, and they supported paying the tax to

Caesar. But the Pharisees were opposed to it based on their close alignment with the oppressed Jewish people. So, if Jesus answered, “Yes” to paying the tax, the adoration of the crowds would have turned into opposition. He’d be seen as just another one of the spineless leaders in league with Roman army, trying to maintain the status quo.<sup>1</sup> If he answered, “No”, then he would have positioned himself over and against Rome. He’d be labeled a revolutionary, an upstart warmonger, a more easily arrested troublemaker. The Pharisees and the Herodians were poised to pounce.

But Jesus’ did not answer “Yes” or “No”. His response was as genius as it was inspired. He called for a coin of the Empire from his listeners---the only coin that could be used to pay the tax. They gave him one, and in good rabbinical form, Jesus asked them a counter question. “*Whose image was stamped on the coin?*” They answered, “*The Emperor’s*”. Jesus then said, “*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and give to God the things that are God’s.*” With this, he not only thwarted the leaders’ plot, but “he issued a challenge that reverberates still in our sanctuaries”.<sup>2</sup>

Most Bible scholars feel that Jesus’ words were intended to harken listeners back to the opening chapter of Genesis, to God’s initial pronouncement and promise, “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*”<sup>3</sup> In fact, Jesus even used here the word, “likeness”! So, vs 20 reads, “*Whose likeness is this, and what title?*” Jesus’ message was that because WE are not made in the likeness of Caesar, but in God’s, we do not represent Caesar in the world, but God.

Now, it is important to know something else. In addition to the image of Caesar, there was also an engraved confession of Caesar’s divinity on the coin. It was sometimes called a tribute penny. It said, “*Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of divine Augustus.*” This meant that any Jew holding one of these coins was breaking the first two of the 10 commandments, and simply using it was not only a reminder of the Roman occupation, but it was worshipping a false god.

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<sup>1</sup>Phillip W. Martin, Jr. “Render Unto Caesar” <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Phillip-Martin-Render-Unto-Caesar.pdf> (accessed 10-19-23)

<sup>2</sup>David Lose. “Pentecost 20: Image, Likeness, and Identity”, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/pentecost-20-image-likeness-and-identity/> (accessed 10-20-23).

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Hare. *Interpretation. Matthew* (Louisville: JKP; 1993),254.

But note, Jesus didn't accuse them of blasphemy or disloyalty, as he could have. Instead, he accused them of being hypocrites, people who put on a false appearance of virtue or religion, a false likeness. The leaders had spiritual amnesia.<sup>4</sup> They had forgotten who they were and to whom they belonged.

*Fr Michael Renninger tells of hearing a conversation between two, prominent people in his congregation, a female politician and a successful businessman. It is not at all hard to imagine. They were speaking honestly of the moral dilemmas that they faced every day...their temptations to cut corners, to betray trusts, to tell lies, to go against their word, to do sinful things in order to succeed! They both admitted that although they went to church on Sunday, they felt it impossible to put the Gospel into practice in their jobs during the week. The man concluded that he gave to Caesar, (using Caesar's currency...metal and sword)... Monday through Friday, and to God, (using God's currency of morality and kindness)<sup>5</sup> on Sunday.<sup>6</sup>*

Well, this is an excuse, but it's not excusable. It's hypocritical. It's spiritual amnesia. We are not to live compartmentalized, divided lives. The Caesars of our world and God are not equals, nor do they have separate realms in which our loyalties to them can float back and forth. All creation is God's realm, and wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we need bear God's likeness...That means that we are to interact with creation in the same manner that God does. As much as we participate in a world that will always try to convince us otherwise, we are to reflect God's holy qualities back to someone else in a way that contributes to THEIR good. We are to act like God who creates, sustains, nurtures, redeems and saves, no matter the cost, not like the Caesars who lord their authority over others for self-gain.<sup>7</sup> For it is God who has claimed us from before we were born. It is God who loves us with a love more powerful than the grave, It is God who said... *'I have inscribed you on the palm of MY hands.'* (Isa 49:15-16).

*Philip Martin writes of a recent edition of the magazine, Intelligent Life, which ran an article where six leaders gave responses to the question: what's is the point? Novelist and*

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<sup>4</sup> David Lose.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Martin.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Renninger. "A Sermon for every Sunday". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54QPp0oVRvw> . (accessed 10-20-23).

<sup>7</sup> David Lose.

*atheist Philip Pullman weighed in, as did a philosopher, a poet, a psychoanalyst and, lastly, a reporter. “Their articulate responses were all fairly interesting,” Martin says, “to read, very auspicious-sounding, full of wisdom and observation. Most compelling for me, however, was the simple four-word response that came from the writer/biographer, Ann Wroe.” “She was,” he continues, “the one person among them all whose career essentially involves scouring the sum total of people’s life stories and finding within them some pattern and meaning. Ms. Wroe responded, ‘The point is love.’”*<sup>8</sup> Yes, love is ultimately what we, and no one, else are able to render to God and creation. What a privilege to bear God’s image---as the palm of God’s hand bears ours.”<sup>9</sup>

So, brothers and sisters, as we head out there this week, and temptations confront us, as things come our way that try to lure us to sell out, to lie, or cheat, to abandon God’s realm and live only in the realm of Caesar, we need STOP. When we are invited to compromise and live what is wrong, to follow other Caesars who demand our loyalties, we need STOP. When we are pulled to concede God’s will and work for the world, we need STOP, and ask ourselves, “*In whose image am I made? Whose name is marked on my forehead in my baptism?* We don’t have to read initials marked on us with a permanent marker to know the answer. We belong to God. ....every part of us. We belong to God, and we’re sent to bear God’s image...here and out there!

*“Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Martin.

<sup>9</sup> Richard E. Spalding. *Pastoral Perspective. Matt 22:15-22* In: D. Bartlett, B. Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Yr A, Vol 4*, (Louisville: WJKP; 2011), 192.