

Trinity 23, 2017  
Image is Everything  
St. Mathew 22:15-22  
St. Andrew's Church – Jacksonville, Or  
By Fr. Bill Baker

Those of us who have been part of the Christian church for any length of time know that in this world we are subject to persecution and opposition for our very faith in Christ. In John's Gospel we find the reason for this in Jesus' own words, *"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen thee out of the world, therefore the world hateth you"* (St. John 15:18-19). Today in our Gospel reading, we were part of the crowd as we watched Jesus confront those who came against him and in this setting I hope we were able to see that in our service to the Lord we too must expect confrontation. In the end it is my hope that we come to realize that it is in love that we confront, not that we must win the battle, for the war is already won in Christ. Our fight is always to plant the seeds.

And so we begin:

*"Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians."* There is an important inference here that needs to be understood in order to see exactly what is taking place. The Pharisees were a powerful band of self-righteous religious leaders whose over-the-top formalism could not even be kept by themselves. They were inclined that those who wished to pay tithes and give first fruits to the Temple should not be subject to the laws of man. They hated pagans and they hated anyone who would exert power over them...in this case, Jesus himself. If Jesus were to break one of their laws...they could ensnare him. But, what if he didn't? What if Jesus were to agree with them? Time to side up with an enemy against a mutual threat...in come the Herodians. Rome demanded tribute from the Jews and Herod was charged with raising it. The Herodians were soldiers of Herod with allegiance to Rome and had no inclinations to the worship of God. A perfect counter part to a perfect trap. No matter what Jesus would say...someone would have grounds to arrest Him and disband His following. And so, *"they*

*sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians.”* Self-righteous religious leaders on one side and pagans on the other.

Now, the best way to bend someone to your point of view or to gain their trust is to puff them up, make them feel like they are your superior and that you are truly interested in what they have to say. And so, the Pharisees begin to butter Jesus up, *“Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men.”* They should have stopped right there and walked away. But, the truth only laid in their words, not in their hearts. They are using truth as a deception to gain an expected result. In other words; “Jesus, you only speak the truth and are not influenced by any other man’s words and therefore we can trust in what you say.” Can you imagine from your position in Christ someone trying to provoke God to pride? That’s what you and I are subject to by those who know not who they are truly dealing with. Have you ever been approached by someone trying to gain your support, concerned about the lack of compassion in the world today, only to find out that what they are asking you to support is their own acceptance of immorality or tolerance of every societal whim that the world can devise? Here, in our Gospel reading today, we are being warned not to play these games, not to be enticed by the seeming benevolence of misplaced words...in their treacherous deceptions and self interests they would rub your shoulders...only to get closer to your throats. After the buttering comes the big question:

*“Tell us therefore, what thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?”* Here we notice that tithes are not mentioned. Why not? Wouldn’t the Pharisees be more interested in getting a commitment from Jesus that tithes are required over and above that which is paid unto Caesar? Oh...wait a minute. I almost forgot...they are not interested in tithes at this moment, only the persecution of the man Jesus, whose following challenges their own power. How silly of me to forget there are agendas out there against Christ and his flock...agendas that continue to persist into the lives of Christians unto this very day. Agendas that have infiltrated many of today’s houses of worship and taken root, changing the very course of Christianity.

*"But Jesus perceived their wickedness (the Pharisees), and said, Why tempt me, ye hypocrites?"* Time to set the truth free and walk away. Notice that Jesus' words are not soft...he is calling out the deceivers and there is strength and conviction in his tone. If you have confidence in Jesus Christ, if He is truly the ruler of your heart, if you are going to claim discipleship, you must bare the full armor of God and fearlessly step out in faith. *"Show me the tribute money."* Show me where you stand! *"Whose is this image..."* Image. Image is a perception put out in front that speaks volumes about where we stand, about what's important to us, and the direction in which we are headed. Image is used by many to gain power and exert authority...to exhibit control and influence. The Queen of England has image...whatever she does or says, people listen, people are interested...she has influence. How about E. F. Hutton? Do you remember him? He had so much image that when he would speak everyone was to stop what he or she were doing and adhere to his message. Snoop-Dog has image; so much of it that it changed the perception of music in a generation of kids.

Image is powerful and having your face on the currency of the day says much about the power you have. Caesar seemed to have all the power of his day, so much so that all currency had his face plastered all over it. Is there anything wrong with having an image that bares strength and influence? No. The persona found in someone that lends itself to a strong image can have several positive outcomes. Caesar's image is on the coin and carries with it a perception by which a kingdom is governed. If this hierarchy has been established to care for a nation and the people depend upon it, should not we expect to pay tribute, to pay our taxes? The Pharisees thought themselves so wise in their attempted trap, but they are about to learn a hard lesson. In their ill-gotten focus, to bring Jesus down, they failed to realize that church and state both need to be supported. Jesus sees through the Pharisees scheme and only brings forth the truth that there is a requirement to maintain a social system without failing to provide for the needs of spiritual life; *"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."* Once again Jesus has a 'drop the mike' moment. Do we have to choose between the church and our governmental structure? No. As men and women of God we have the great responsibility of keeping our governmental structure free of deceit and focused on the proper care of the nation at hand.

The Roman coin had the image of Caesar imbedded in it. The people were required to accept the laws of the land as established by their current governmental format. The image established by each of the various nations of the earth, all speak to a particular cultures balance between the world and its relationship to the Almighty. But, is that all there is to 'image'? Is there no counterpart to man's authority to govern according to his own will?

We have talked a bit about image, but what does God say about it? Genesis 1 tells us that **we are made in the image of God**, that the spirit of God is imbedded in each of us. Do we feel the power, the authority, the commitment to fearlessly care for the Gospel of Christ in this present world? We have an obligation to assist in the requirements of society, in our particular governmental structures, to the care of those in need and to be vigilant in the stabilization of our place in the world as God's people; this includes all nations of the earth, for we are all made in the image of God and we give to God that which by our very nature belongs to Him...ourselves, our souls and our bodies.

I leave you with these words from St. Hilary:

"We are also to render to God things that are God's: that is, body and soul and will. The coin of Caesar is in gold, on which his image is stamped. But man is God's coin, on which is the image of God. Therefore, give your money to Caesar; keep for God a blameless conscience" (Hilary, in Matthew, Canon 23).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.