

The Pharisees have had enough of Jesus' teaching. He's accused them of peddling bad religion, leading people astray and standing in the footsteps of those who killed God's prophets and messengers. So, desiring his arrest, they send some of their own people along with some Herodians to lay a trap for him. The Herodians supported Herod Antipas, the Jewish ruler who collaborated with the Romans.

After a bit of empty flattery they pose the question – "is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" Remember the emperor Caesar ruled as a god, claiming power as a divine being. Taxes weren't used for hospitals and education, but to bolster the military power of this blasphemous form of government. You can see the bind they've tried to put Jesus in. If he says "yes, the taxes are lawful," he's accepting the power of Rome and the rights of Caesar. The zealots and revolutionaries and the religious faithful would turn against him and the Pharisees can denounce him as a blasphemer. But if he says, in the presence of the Herodians, "no, don't pay the emperor's taxes," then he's guilty of sedition, and likely to be arrested for fomenting anti-Roman sentiment. Either way, the Pharisees win.

Jesus, as he always does, manages to avoid the trap by introducing a genuinely religious dimension to the situation. The Pharisees' question is focused on the kingdom of this world. Are you for or against Rome? Jesus, who proclaimed the kingdom of heaven, effectively says in return – forget Rome, are you for or against God? The Pharisees ask their question on a purely human, political plane to set Jesus up. But Jesus is always deeply in touch with who he is and where he comes from - anointed by God's Spirit, God's beloved Son. There is no such thing, for him, as a purely political answer to this kind of question. He forces his questioners into a confrontation with their own identity.

"Whose head is on this coin?" he asks. It's Caesar's picture, just as we have the head of our queen or king on our coins. Basically, that picture means that Caesar controls the economy. He is emperor over the kingdom of buying and selling, of power, politics, laws and ownership. In the grand scheme of things it doesn't really matter if some of the money circulating in that economy returns to Caesar in the form of tax. The person who worked for it, or bribed or exploited others to get it, doesn't own it. It's part of a system that serves the emperor, not God.

By invoking the language of “whose *image*, is this,” though, Jesus reminds his hearers of a foundational Jewish belief. People bear the image of God. If a coin can be given back to Caesar because it carries his image, how much more are our lives owed to God, whose Spirit dwells in us? Everything that makes us “us” comes from God – our breath, our consciousness, our sense of having a “self”, our ability to relate to others, all of this “beinghood” comes from God’s Spirit creating and re-creating us in every moment. And yet, God’s image is broken and buried in us, and we are often very far from turning our whole selves toward God’s love and God’s will for us.

The Pharisees thought they had Jesus in an impossible situation because they’d limited their vision to only one “kingdom,” meaning, one economy, one set of power dynamics. That’s the kingdom of this world. It is easy for us to get caught into this way of thinking too...believing that what we can see around us is all there is. When we’re in this mindset, we can come to believe that the only way to make this world more just is to work to improve or change the system. We get involved in politics – or in some cases uprisings or revolutions. We become activists or community organisers, seeking to influence the powers that be to do things in the way we believe is best. We march, or write letters, or donate money, or get involved in policy-making, to make this “kingdom” that we’re immersed in closer to how we imagine a good world should be. This is fine as far as it goes. But it's all giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. It’s just one part of the story, the least important part. And we can end up mistakenly serving evil even as we think we’re doing good.

It’s a mistake for the church to become too closely aligned with one or other political movement. Some people used to call the Anglican church “the National party at prayer,” given our church’s heartland in the leafy suburbs. But for those who don’t like that description the answer isn’t to simply rearrange the church around a progressive political vision. It’s not about deciding which politics or ideology we most closely align with and then anointing it as the most Christian option. When we died and were raised with Christ we became pilgrims, “aliens” in this world, no longer citizens of it, no longer dominated by its perspective.

When Jesus is in the wilderness being tempted, Satan tells him that the authority of “all the kingdoms of the world...has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.” (Luke 4.6) Elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus speaks of “the prince of this world.” (John 14.30) He’s not talking about Caesar. He’s talking about the One who gave Caesar his authority, the same Evil One that tempted Jesus in the desert. We must remember that this world is, as C.S. Lewis phrased it, “enemy occupied territory,” and our job is to resist that occupation by lovingly creating spaces where an alternative reality can arise and flourish. The kingdom of God can’t be forged using political techniques, but comes about through prayer, community, the pursuit of virtue, and the kind of sacrificial, costly acts of devotion and loving service that God’s Spirit calls us to for the sake of others.

Sure, we can give time, energy and money to giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and this might intersect with God’s realm... insofar as the shifts we make align with the workings of God’s Spirit in the world. The Church should exercise a prophetic voice in the systems of the world in which we are embedded. But our priority should be to give to God what belongs to God – which is our very selves.

The best way to do that is by cleaning up and radiating the image of God that we carry as God’s “picture” in this world – to become icons of God’s kingdom, pointing to God’s love. This requires ongoing conversion: honesty about who we are and what we’re like in the grip of our worst impulses and openness to the healing work of God in us. It requires community – we uncover our royal image in relationship to one another. And it requires the kind of prayer that enables us to be transformed into people who know how to love.

I have an old friend who in response to recent world events wrote on facebook: “As a historian, it is hard to feel optimistic about humanity. We are so consistently awful...” This awfulness has infected the Christian church in spades over the centuries, so I don’t wish to be glib in affirming Christian community as the hopeful response to this statement. But our faith proclaims that although our entrenched awfulness as a species managed do the worst thing imaginable – to kill God – even so, Christ living in us can restore the buried image of God within humanity. We who have been washed in baptism, have been given the grace to keep wiping our faces clean of the distortions and cruelties of our kind, and to keep returning our humanity to God to be renewed and ultimately glorified. This is what it means to give to God what is God’s for the sake of the world.