

Proper 24, Year A

Matthew 22.15-22

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Christ Church, Chelsea

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This morning begins with a little gift to you all. It's yours, to take home. To keep! Here is... a penny. Take hold of it. Look at its two sides. Feel its edges.¹

Do as Jesus surely did when the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus. Turn the coin over, and over again. Surely Jesus did similar, as he held a well-worn denarius in his hand.

And now look on your penny at the head of the Queen. There she is, just as Jesus looked at Caesar's picture. It's an image we've probably seen almost every day of our lives – until the contactless payment transitions of recent years. Perhaps we'll only realise just how familiar it's been when we hold the first of those new coins the Royal Mint announced this week, with the head of King Charles.

And the Queen is there on our coin because she was, until last year, our Head of State. She represents our unity. Our schools, hospitals, roads, police, laws; the taxes we pay – all of this exists because of the life we share together.

Each state has its own way of organising all this. And some of them are better than others. As Jesus gazed at the image of Caesar, he didn't see a benevolent ruler who yearned to create a fair society. He saw an oppressor – an imperial overlord who siphoned money away from his conquered people to sustain the power and prestige of Rome. Jesus longed for the day when the Jewish people might be free of such oppression.

¹ The inspiration for the use of the penny in this sermon is drawn from Susan Sayers, *Living Stones: Year A*, pp.223-4. Sayers takes her talk in the direction of the infinite difference between earthly power and divine power; I have amended this to focus on the different layers/purposes angle.

And the irony is – those Pharisees and Herodians who handed him the coin would have entirely agreed with him. They didn't want to be ruled by Rome. They wanted Israel to return to its glory days, an independent state under its great rulers like King David and King Solomon. Just like Israelis – and Palestinians – in the horrendous and messy conflict we see unfolding before us today, the Pharisees and Herodians longed for independence, and safety, and freedom. But those two groups differed from Jesus in one important respect. The Romans, they had decided, were not going away any time soon. So why fight them? Accept reality. Collaborate with the oppressors, and at least we can keep some of our Jewish privileges.

Matthew our gospel writer describes their question to Jesus as a trap. And in some ways it was. In Matthew's gospel this moment takes place during the final week of Jesus' life, as he wanders the streets of Jerusalem. These Roman collaborators are looking for an excuse to get rid of this holy leader who seems to be undermining the careful compromises that have entrenched their position of power. This question is another attempt to get something with which to denounce Jesus to the Roman authorities. But the Pharisees and Herodians are also asking Jesus a very real question to which they'd love a better answer. 'Well, go on then,' they seem to be saying. 'Here's a coin. Stop offering dreams untainted by political realities. Imagine you're leader for the day. Tell us: what would you do?'

And as Jesus looks at the head of Caesar on that coin, he offers his striking response: 'Give ... to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And Matthew concludes his story: 'When [Jesus' opponents] heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.'

But is it all that simple?

When the Nazis took power in Germany, most Christians in that country did not put up a fight. The Catholic and Lutheran churches signed deals with the new government. They could keep their worship going, as long as they didn't interfere in politics. After all, in the traditional rendition of the saying: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.'

‘No’, said the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The church cannot be carved off into some separate sphere of private devotion, divorced from how we go about our life in the world. This is not what Jesus is advocating. That’s patently obvious from the way that final week of his life panned out: Jesus went to his death precisely because he couldn’t separate a life totally offered to God from his existence in the midst of an oppressive regime. Bonhoeffer summed up his view as follows: ‘the space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world[. It is] the world that is loved and reconciled by God’.²

I like that imagery. It’s tempting to imagine the church and the world like competitors on some cosmic game of *Risk*, continually battling to and fro for territory. But they’re not like that. Yes, we are called as Christians to live in the world. And that means living under whatever ruler we find ourselves under. It means paying our taxes. It means celebrating the good that states and rulers can bring about: the ways that our hospitals, schools, social services and so on are vehicles for compassion, and fairness, and human dignity.

But rulers won’t always rule for good. And that’s the moment that Christians have to step up. It might be through a whisper. It might be through a tap on the shoulder. It might be by shouting loud and clear. The church is there not to fight for territory, but to ‘testify to the world that it is still the world’, the world that God has created and loved and redeemed. ‘Hey. We’re made for something better than this’ could be our refrain.

So, if you have put it down, pick up that penny again. And this time, I invite you to do as – perhaps – Jesus also did. Open your hand. Let that penny sit in your palm. This is our currency. You can walk out of church, head to the King’s Road, and – with a little top-up from your own wallet – buy yourself something nice.

But this penny is the world’s currency. It can be used for good, to be sure. But it’s a slippery thing. It’s all too easy to judge our value in terms of our

² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

wealth, to see ourselves as keeping up with our neighbours. It's all too easy to dedicate our lives to accumulating more of it, simply for its own sake.

In church, we depend on your pennies and pounds for our worldly needs, like keeping the roof on. But at the same time we have another currency.³ It's not one we can just swap with our pounds and pennies, as we might do at a bureau de change. It's the currency of the kingdom of God. This is the currency of forgiveness and resurrection. It's the notes of mercy and grace, the coins of walking the way of the cross and washing one another's feet. It's ours to build up and spend, because we've been bought with it. It's the heavenly currency that proclaims God's reconciling love to the world.

There are two currencies. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. Treasures on earth have their place, for a short time. But cherish above all the money that never runs out, the wealth that you gain precisely as you share it. This is the currency of God, that buys the things of eternal worth.

³ Samuel Wells, *Learning to Dream Again*, (2013), p.84