

**ADDRESS
Pentecost**

18 October 2020

20th Sunday after

Exodus 33. 12-23	The glory of the Lord
Psalm 99	The holy God
1 Thessalonians 1.1-10	An example to all believers
Matthew 22. 15-33	Paying taxes; Resurrection

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear
and to understand your Word, and
open our hearts to do your will.
We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

This year's Federal budget was brought down in the midst of the deadly Corona virus epidemic, which just goes to prove the old saying – only two things in life are certain: death and taxes. One of America's founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, generally gets the credit for this saying, but he took it from a theology book by the English novelist Daniel Defoe, written 63 years earlier. Defoe says that both death and taxes are works of the Devil. He's not Robinson Crusoe believing that.

Today's Gospel passage, written 17 centuries before Defoe, records Jesus' teaching about taxes and death, three days before his own death.

As always, we need to see this passage in context – Matthew tells us that, two days before, Jesus had proclaimed himself to be the Messiah, the eternal hope of the Jewish people, by riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to the cries of *Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*

Next day, Jesus had stormed into the temple and driven out all those who were selling and buying in the temple precincts and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Then he began to heal the blind and the lame who came to him there, although Jewish law prohibited them from being in the temple.

The guardians of Jewish tradition, the chief priests and scribes, were furious, but they were afraid to silence Jesus because of the people's acclaim. The Jews had no power to have him killed, but the Romans had, so next day the Pharisees brought along the Herodians, the supporters of Rome's puppet king Herod. Perhaps, together, they could trap Jesus into uttering treason against Rome. Then he would have to be executed. Religion and politics can be a deadly combination.

After the greasy compliment, *we know that you teach the truth* etc etc comes the entrapment question, *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?* If Jesus answers *Yes*, he is justifying Rome's occupation and oppression, and the people's love will turn to hate. If he answers *No*, he is inciting revolution, and he can be arrested for treason. But, of course, Jesus says neither – as he carries no money, he asks for a denarius.

This one is probably a fake, like the Roman coins in most people's collections, but you can see how small a denarius was.

The coin Jesus was given was a special denarius Rome's subjects were compelled to use to pay their tax – it was known as tribute money.

On one side was the head of emperor Tiberius with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus". On the other side were the words "Pontifex Maximus" (high priest) with an image of Concordia, the Roman goddess of harmony. Both sides were especially offensive to Jews, who worshipped the one true God. Yet, to pay their tax, they had to use this idolatrous coin.

The denarius was the standard Roman coin for more than 400 years – a day's wage for a soldier or a common labourer. The denarius remained the unit of accounting in the empire long after the coin was no longer issued, and the initial d was the symbol for 'penny' when I was a boy, when one penny would buy a small Peters ice cream in a cone. I remember. In older versions of the Bible the word *denarius* in this passage is translated *tribute penny*.

Jesus's enemies are not asking a genuine question; they are setting a trap. So Jesus avoids the trap by not answering *Yes* or *No* but by stating a principle they could not argue with. *Give to Caesar* (literally *give back to Caesar*) *what belongs to Caesar and give back to God what belongs to God*.

By giving no direct answer to this question he provides the guiding answer to many questions – whose image is on this coin? *Caesar's*. Whose image is on us? *God's*. Everything we are comes from God and belongs to God. We can honour Caesar only by honouring God. We can separate the institutions of church and state, but we cannot divide our lives into sacred and secular without betraying our divine nature.

This is something we all can easily forget, as we think about how to use our money and our time, especially as Covid has given many of us so much more time.

Earlier in his ministry Jesus had stated this principle clearly, and more than once, saying, *You cannot serve two masters.* and again, *You cannot serve God and money, wealth, riches.*

The Greek word *mammon* in the Gospel can be translated in a number of ways, but all the translations miss Jesus' play on words. The Greek *mammon* comes from a Hebrew word meaning *firm, steadfast, trustworthy*. *Amen* is derived from the same Hebrew word.

Jesus was saying, *People have come to trust in riches; you need to trust in God. Paying your tax to Caesar does not mean you are putting your trust in Caesar, honouring Caesar as god. You are simply doing your duty as a citizen.* No wonder the Pharisees and the Herodians slunk away, as Matthew reports. Luke says simply that they were stunned into silence.

But, later that day, as the tension kept rising, another group of enemies come to Jesus with another trick question. This time they want to know which side he is on on one of the major theological questions of the day – is there life after death?

The Sadducees, the priestly caste, said 'No', there is no resurrection -- they accepted only the first five books of their Scriptures, which saw death as the end of life. After that came only a shadowy existence in Sheol, the realm of the dead, a place where the righteous and the unrighteous shared a common fate, isolated both from God and from the living. The only reward for the righteous was a long and happy life, like Job's reward for his resolute faithfulness. As we read, *After this Job lived for 140 years, and saw his children and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.* (Job 42.16-17)

The Pharisees, the priestly caste said, 'Yes', there is resurrection, for all, because they also accepted the later Scriptures, the writings which record some of the history of the Jewish people after the Exile. These writings sometimes taught that the dead did not remain in Sheol for ever, and they sometimes taught that the righteous went directly to heaven, while the unrighteous went to Sheol, which came to be seen as a place of eternal punishment. What came to be called 'hell'.

Most of these teachings are found in the Jewish apocrypha but we have one clear promise of resurrection in the last chapter of the book of Daniel, the last book of the Old Testament to be written. It reads: *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.* (Dan. 12.2)

We know from Jesus' example that what awaits us is not the resuscitation of our old bodies, not rebirth in a new body, perhaps in a new life form, as some Eastern religions teach, but resurrection, the real us in new bodies which are recognisably like our old ones, but with some new qualities. Sometimes I hope Muslims are right in teaching that our new bodies look like the ones we had at our best. I'd rather be seen in heaven in my 30-year-old body than in my 89-year-old one. But we have no evidence that I will.

Jesus dismisses the Sadducees' question, their *reductio ad absurdum* question, because, again, it is not a genuine question – it is an attempt to win an ally in a theological argument. Jesus responds by telling them they do not know even the five books of scripture they do accept – they do not believe in angels, yet the Pentateuch speaks of angels at least 30 times, as God's messengers and agents.

Actually, Marty and I have seen angels – one year we went to the Christmas pageant at a Los Angeles mega-church, the Crystal Cathedral. Mary rode in on a real donkey, the wise men arrived on real camels, the Roman soldiers rode in on real horses, and there was a real man walking behind with a dustpan keeping the blue carpet clean. And there were real angels – flying high above us on almost invisible wires – lovely young girls, with beautiful faces and long blonde hair rippling down over their sheer white dresses. I remember.

Sadly, there are no more Christmas pageants in the Crystal Cathedral; a few years after our visit the ministry family was torn apart by multiple arguments, the congregation shrank, the family went bankrupt and the building was sold. It has now been refurbished as the Roman catholic cathedral of Orange county, and the animals, and the angels, have gone.

Real angels are not like those Hollywood models – they look like any of us, like people who reflect the image of God, who love other people, who help other people,

who bring God's message of salvation to other people. They may have a long life on earth, or they may live here but a short time, but their whole life is lived with God, into eternity.

This is our calling, and our destiny. Jesus affirms by his teaching and his example that our God is the God of the living, not of the dead; if we are faithful to him in life, he will still be with us in death. That is his resurrection promise: *Because I live, you shall live also.* (John 14.19)

Grant us, O Lord, wisdom and grace, to make the most of the time that is left to us on earth. Strengthen us to follow in the steps of your Son Jesus, into his Resurrection life. In his name we pray. Amen.