

## **Divided loyalties? Reflection for Pentecost 20** by Megan Cambridge (Lay Reader)

This morning's Gospel reading is again taken from Matthew's gospel and is a continuation of the discourses with the religious leaders. We have heard over the past few weeks how they set out to trap him and trip him up and make him unpopular with the people. I can't help being reminded of Wile E. Coyote the 'Looney Tunes' cartoon character from the Road Runner series - he was always trying to trick and capture the Road Runner bird. However, he always failed. Time and time again, he failed. So here we are in our reading and the religious establishment are trying to trick and trap Jesus but as before they fail.

On this occasion the religious leaders have sent their disciples along with the Herodians (loyal supporters of King Herod). Herodians were primarily politically motivated, whereas the Pharisees and their disciples were primarily religiously motivated. They start off by flattering Jesus, "we know that you are truthful and teach truthfully the way of God. You don't care what anyone thinks nor do you show partiality."

They are correct, of course, Jesus is obedient, faithful, full of integrity, and wisdom. He's always truthful. He is a wonderful example for all leaders and teachers. Jesus knows what they are up to though and he is more than a match for them.

They really thought they had caught Jesus. They planned to accuse Him of supporting pagan rulers if He said to pay the tax and of not supporting the government if He said not to pay the tax.

We could at this point head off in the direction regarding the disjunction of Caesar and God and history's long and occasionally bloody conflict between church and state but in the time a space allowed I think just a couple more simple points based on our Lord's response instead.

The ordinary people didn't like the occupying Roman authorities whose system of government under Herod held down the people. Some at the time expected or hoped Jesus would be a revolutionary against the Roman state but He demonstrates here that was not why He came. He doesn't oppose paying taxes to Caesar, or the Roman government.

There was also a real issue for the Jewish people with the actual coin itself. The coin used to pay the taxes was a denarius, which featured an image of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor at that time. Many Jewish people believed that it was a sin for a coin to bear an image. They viewed it as a violation of the second commandment which prohibited worship of any images. Additionally, there were inscriptions on the coin that read, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus" and "High Priest." Which was not acceptable to a people who believed God was the only divine being.

In his reply Jesus clearly sets a standard by which we can support our governmental authorities. The apostle Paul speaks about this also in Romans 13. We benefit from our governmental structures, leaders, and laws. No government is perfect and we know also that there are those that are cruel and corrupt. However, government is not evil in and of itself.

There are other authority structures such as parents, teachers, employers, bishops, and governmental leaders. We are allowed/encouraged to submit to these authorities, as long as they are not at odds with our loyalty to God.

I have to admit I found the decisions made by the College of Bishops and the Government in closing churches at the time of lockdown difficult to accept. However, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we became church in a different way.

In other ways too we don't all agree with everything that our government does and paying taxes probably isn't our most favourite thing but we understand the sense of greater and collective good that lies behind

this.

Accepting the principle of loyalty to authority/government is not the only point here though. Jesus also makes it clear we are to *“Give . . . to God the things that are God’s.”* **Loyalty is due to God.**

*“What are the things that belong to God?”* I think the answer is **everything**. In Psalm 50:10-12, *“for every animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and everything in it is mine.”* Everything belongs to God. He is Lord of all.

One more thought for us to mull over, something I came across within some of the commentaries.... Jesus asks whose image is on the coin – the reply ‘Caesar’s’. In Genesis (1:26-27) we are told: Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.’ God created us in His own image; in the image of God; male and female. Mankind bears the image of God. ‘Give to God the things that are God’s’.

So, it is good and right to be loyal to government, and other authorities in our lives, but our greatest loyalty should be shown to the one whose image we bear: Our Lord God Almighty.

God allows for us to be loyal in multiple human relationships and institutions but none of these should take the place of our loyalty to God. First and foremost we must be devoted to and faithful to God and that to which He has called us.