

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 18 October 2020

God, source of all light, by your Word give light to our lives. Amen.

Matthew 22:15-22

Life of bearing the image of God

When I began to contemplate the passage in Matthew, I wanted to see what images were there in the two-dollar coin that we are using. Do you know what they are? The heads show the image of Queen Elizabeth II, and the tails, *kōtuku* – white heron. These images may have chosen with great consideration. It shows who is the head of the state and what we cherish in New Zealand. Today we'll explore the life of bearing the image of God based on Matthew 22:15-22. First, we'll think about the image of Caesar on the coin, and next what scripture says about the image of God. It will lead us to the life of bearing the image of God, which we are living in the present.

1. *The Image of Caesar on the coin*

The passage begins with this subtitle – ‘Paying the imperial tax to Caesar.’ The Pharisees ask a sensitive question about paying imperial tax to trap Jesus in his words. Knowing their evil intent, Jesus asks for a coin and also asks, “Whose image (*eikon*- εἰκών) is this, and whose title?”¹ The coin bears Caesar’s *eikon* and belongs to Caesar. Back then, as well as in the present, citizens and subjects of the colonies had a duty to the state - to obey its laws and to pay its taxes. For this, scripture teaches us to fulfil our duty to the state. The apostle Paul tells us that God has appointed higher authorities, and we are obligated to obey them.² He goes on to say, “For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants....Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.”³ The exception, of course, is a situation where human law conflicts with God’s will - in which case we are to obey God.⁴

As such, Jesus let them pay attention to the coin which is stamped out by human hands for human purposes, and the image of Caesar imprinted on it.⁵ Jesus also let them remind of God’s image is stamped out in us by God for his glory.⁶ We’ll find it out more in scripture.

2. *The image of God in the O.T. and the N.T.*

¹ Temple Tax Coins - 1/2 Shekel and Shekel of Tyre - At the Great Temple in Jerusalem, the annual tax levied on Jews was 1/2 shekel per male. The 1/2 shekel and shekel were not always used in everyday commerce but were the only coins accepted by the temple. Many taxpayers required a currency exchange, so money changers set up in the Temple court. Jesus found this business and their shouting (advertising rates) offensive, so he threw over their tables. Silver shekels and half-shekels of Tyre were minted from c. 126 B.C. until c. 57 A.D. Any coin minted prior to 32 A.D. may have circulated in Jerusalem during Jesus' lifetime.

² Romans 13:1-2

³ Romans 13:6-7

⁴ Acts 5:29

⁵ The inscription on the coin is "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, the high priest. Following the reign of Julius Caesar, who was assassinated in 44 B.C., emperors adopted Caesar as part of their name—hence Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1), Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1), etc. Except for Acts 25:21, 25, the New Testament uses the word Caesar throughout (Matthew 22:17-21; Luke 2:1; 3:1; John 19:12, 15; Acts 17:7; 25:10-12; Philippians 4:22).

⁶ Isaiah 43:7

At the beginning of Genesis, God said the first time God stamped out a human being: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”⁷ Humans bear the image- *eikon* of God. They may pay the infamous poll tax, but they do not belong to the emperor. They belong to God. Hebrew scripture (the O.T.) uses the word “images” in two different ways. First, God has created humankind in God's image. Second, God has forbidden the use of graven images because they might encourage idolatry. For the image of God, Paul indicates that in Christ, the full representation of God is as his ‘image.’ In Colossians 1:15-20, under the title of ‘The Supremacy of Christ,’ the author presents Christ not only ‘the image of the invisible God, but also ‘the first-born of all creation.’ Here the image of God also implies a relationship of Christ to cosmos.⁸ Further ‘the first-born of all creation’ means his place as the mediator of creation in contrast to the things created. The life of Jesus on the earth bearing the image of God is summarized in Philippians 2:6-8: “...though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross...” It shows that we are also expected to live Jesus’ life to fulfil the image of God in us. If so, what is to live the life of Jesus as bearers of the image of God?

3. *Life of bearing the image of God*

In our Storytime, we heard about the ugly duckling. The question was, ‘how did the ugly duckling find his identity? He had to live as an ugly duckling as he believed so. He also learned what it meant being ‘ugly’ through others’ hostile behaviours to him. It had made him run away from the harsh and unhappy life. He continued to be an ugly duckling until he discovered his new identity/image through others. This time, they were the beautiful swans. But even so, his new image wasn’t fully restored till he saw his reflection in the water. The story tells us two important things. First, we must bear the image of God for the sake of one another in this faith community. Second, as in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we have to see our reflections through Christ who is like a mirror or the water, and who leads us to be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another in the Holy Spirit.

Humans bear God’s image, and wherever they live and operate – whether in the social, economic, political, or religious realm – we belong to God. Our primary loyalties do not switch when they move out of the church and into the voting booth. Whatever we render unto Caesar, or to the retirement fund, or to the offering basket at church, we can never afford to forget this: we belong entirely to God. Read this way, the passage does not answer many potential issues about Christians’ duties to the government – taxation, voting referendums, and the like. In reality, governments act as if citizens have no higher commitments than to the state. When the divine image is denied, and persons are made by political circumstances to be less than human, then the passage carries a revolutionary word, a word that has to be spoken to both oppressed and oppressor. May God help us understand it. Amen.

⁷ Genesis 1:26

⁸ Again in 2 Corinthians 4:4