

PENTECOST 20 (PROPER 24), OCTOBER 18, 2020

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Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon Title: *Jesus: The Image of the Invisible God*

Prayer: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

Salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

Text: The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel Reading: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 22nd chapter.

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ, most of us have flipped a coin. Heads, we do this. Tails, we do that. One side of a coin has an image of a head on it and the other side has an image of something else. This was true even back in the first century.

The coin that Jesus used in today's Gospel had an image of Caesar on it. Jesus used that image to teach an important lesson. And, there are also other images in today's Gospel. These images are not on coins, but they are important, nevertheless.

I. To set the stage:

- It was the last Tuesday before Jesus died on the cross.
- Jesus was teaching in the temple during the days leading up to Passover.
- The crowds were large.
- And Jesus had been teaching in parable after parable – using them to illustrate many of the truths of heaven.

Many of the parables exposed the corruption and hypocrisy among the religious leaders of that day, most notably the Pharisees. In other words, Jesus was damaging their reputation – exposing their hypocrisy. Rather than repent and amend their sinful ways, they decided that they had to take Jesus down a notch or two.

We know how desperate these leaders were because they teamed up with the Herodians. The Herodians were people who supported the Herod family. They had supported the Herod who ordered the death of the boys in Bethlehem a year or two after Jesus was born. And now, they supported the son of this Herod who now ruled at the time of today's Gospel.

It often surprises people to learn that the Herods were not Jewish but were kept in power by the military might of the Roman government. Naturally, they were big fans of the Roman occupation of Israel and so were their followers, the Herodians.

The Pharisees on the other hand, hated the Roman occupation with a passion. They saw it as an abomination that defiled the land. The fact that these two parties could come together was a true sign of desperation.

You see, the Pharisees have put their heads together to figure out a way to trap Jesus. They have a plan that seems foolproof. It uses the Jewish laws and traditions as one jaw of the trap and the authority of Rome as the other:

- If Jesus says it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, He loses with the people who consider any submission to Roman authority as against the will of God.
- If He says it is wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, the Herodians will go to their superiors, and harsh Roman justice will get rid of Jesus for them.

Of course, the Herodians and the Pharisees both had the wrong image of Jesus. So to both the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus is evil. Therefore, He is a threat to religious and political security. Thus, His popularity diminishes their popularity. So, they see Jesus as an obstacle to be removed.

Now before we get ready to condemn the image of Jesus that the Herodians and Pharisees had, we need to examine the image we have of Jesus. At birth, we too want to be the center of everything. Whereby:

- We want to be the image that everyone looks at.
- We want to be the image that everyone serves.

Yes, at birth, each and every one of us has an image of ourselves, that we are so important that it entirely blocks out our image of Jesus.

II. However, there was a time that we were the image of God. The very first chapter of the Bible tells us that God created man in His own image (Genesis 1:26-28). You see, Adam and Eve were the pinnacle of God's creation and God described that creation with the words *very good* (Genesis 1:31).

However, it didn't take long for Adam and Eve to spoil that image. Instead of focusing on God, they allowed Satan to convince them to focus on themselves. In so doing, they were not satisfied to be in the image of God. Rather, they wanted to actually be God.

And so, they spoiled the image of God in themselves and brought a curse on all of creation. Since that time all men – Cain, the Pharisees and Herodians, you and I – have been born with our image of good and evil turned upside down. Thus, our image of God is out of focus.

As we consider the Pharisees and the Herodians, they sent their disciples in the hope that Jesus would not recognize them. In addition, these disciples presented an image of respect toward Jesus, but it was only that, an image. It was an image designed to disarm Jesus and catch Him off guard. It didn't work. Jesus turned the tables on them.

You see, Jesus understood something that they did not. God is in control of both civil authority and religious authority. In the Old Testament Reading for today, Isaiah points out that Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, in spite of all outward appearances, is God's instrument. The Lord is using him to work out history for the ultimate good of His people.

Likewise, when Pilate boasts of his authority either to punish Jesus or to let Him go. Jesus answered him: "*You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above*" (John 19:11).

So, when Jesus said to the Herodians and the Pharisees, "*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,*" He was telling us that Caesar and all government is God's instrument at work in the physical world. Therefore, obeying the laws of the land and participating in our democracy are a part of our obedience to God.

The sad irony of today's Gospel is that even though the Herodians and the Pharisees were awe-struck by the elegance of Jesus answer, they did not stick around to hear what else He had to say. All they did was to leave Him and go away (v 22).

If they would have followed Jesus, they would have encountered another image. They would have understood that Jesus *is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15). And nowhere do we see that image more clearly than when we look at the cross.

As we look at the Christ as He hangs on the cross, our up-side-down, out-of-focus image of God becomes right-side-up and crystal clear. However, the world sees an image of:

- A defeated rebel.
- A common criminal.
- The removal of a political enemy.

Therefore:

- It is in this apparent destruction, though, that the Son of Man is glorified.
- It is in this act of selfless love that we see the true image of God.

You see in the image of God nailed to the cross, is the ultimate opposite or inversion of reality as we see it through sin-distorted eyes:

- That we are born of the flesh of Adam.
- That we want to be like gods, deciding for ourselves what is good and what is evil.
- That we, like the Pharisees and Herodians, would attach a label to God.
- That we would restrict Him to the religious and ban Him from the secular parts of our lives.

For the condemnation we deserve, God's eternal Son has chosen to take in our place. How does He take our place? He takes it to the cross:

- His death for our life.
- His damnation for our salvation.

Therefore, the blessed inversion of the cross *is* the clearest image of the invisible God! How so? The image that the world sees as defeat is, in fact, is the victory of God:

- It is by this victory that we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation.
- It is by this victory that even though we die, we shall rise again.

For Jesus Himself did not remain in the grave, but became the first fruits of those who rise from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:22). Therefore, His resurrection is the assurance that the image of our Savior on the cross is the image of victory.

Conclusion: Dear friends in Christ, on the cross Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews is, for us, the image of the invisible God. In that image you see what the God of the universe has done to make you His own! St. Paul writes in Romans: "*He Who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?*" (Romans 8:32).

In the name of ✠ Jesus, Who forgives all your sins. Amen.

To God alone the Glory!