

Jesus, Caesar, and God (29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6—I am the LORD, there is No Other

1. The LORD speaks to king “Cyrus” of Persia
2. Monothelism: “I am the LORD, and *there is no other*; besides me there is no God”
3. Creator: “I form light and create darkness...”

Psalm 96—The ‘Gods’ of the Nations are Nothing

1. The LORD: “to be feared above all gods (Hebrew *elohim*) (v. 4)
2. Pagan ‘gods’: “all the gods of the peoples are idols” (v. 5; cf. LXX *daimones*)
3. The LORD “reigns” = he is king (v. 10)

1 Thess 1:1-5—The Beginning of the Letter

1. Paul calls them to “faith,” “love,” and “hope” = 3 theological virtues (1:4)

Matthew 22:15-21—The Riddle of What Belongs to Caesar

1. Context: the Pharisees try to “entangle” Jesus “in his talk” (22:15)
2. Trap: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (22:17)
 - a. If ‘Yes’: he can be accused by Jews of being a Roman sympathizer
 - b. If ‘No’: he can be accused by Romans of rebellion/sedition
3. Jesus’ Response: “Show me the money for the tax”
 - a. Denarius: Stamped with the profile face of Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 14-37)
 - b. 1st Problem: Law *against* “graven images” (Exod 20:4)
 - c. Inscription: “Ti[berivs] Caesar Divi Avg[vsti] F[ilivs] Avgvstvs”
 - d. Translation: (“Caesar Augustus **Tiberius**, son of the Divine Augustus”
 - e. Two Previous Emperors: Julius Caesar and Augustus, both *divinized*
 - f. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* (“Deified Julius” and “Deified Augustus”)
4. Jesus’ Question: “Whose *likeness* and inscription is on it?”
 - a. “Likeness” (Greek *eikōn*) and “Inscription” (Greek *epigraphē*)
 - b. Image and likeness of Caesar → belongs to Caesar
 - c. Image and likeness of God → belongs to God
 - d. Man and Woman: made in “image (*eikōn*) and likeness” of God (Gen 1:26-27)
5. Response: “When they heard him, they *marveled* and went away” (22:22)

St. Lawrence of Brindisi (d. AD 1619): We Bear the Image and Likeness of God

To each, he says, must be given what belongs to him. This, surely, is a judgment fully of heavenly wisdom and instruction. For it teaches that authority is twofold, having an earthly and human aspect, and a heavenly and divine aspect. It teaches that we owe a twofold duty of obedience: to human laws and to the law of God. The coin bearing Caesar’s likeness and inscription must be given to Caesar, and the one stamped with the divine image and likeness must be given to God. We bear the imprint of your glorious

face, O Lord. *We are made in the image and likeness of God. So you, O Christian, because you are a human being, are God's tribute money—a little coin bearing the image and likeness of the divine emperor.* (Lawrence of Brindisi, *Opera Omnia* 8.336; trans. E. Barneclutt).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

1. What is the nature of the “trap” or “test” the Pharisees set for Jesus? How does he avoid falling into it?

2. What is the connection between the Old Testament reading about monotheism and the story of Jesus and Caesar's coin? (Hint: the clue lies in the inscription that would have been at the bottom of Titus's coin.)

3. How can we as Christians today give “Caesar” what belongs to him and “God” what belongs to “God”? What does this ‘twofold obedience’ look like in practice?

For Further Study

1. Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 284-86.
2. Edith Barneclutt, *Journey with the Fathers: Commentaries on the Sunday Gospels Year A*. (New York: New City Press, 1992), pp. 134-35.