

With the gospel reading for today, we shift away from the parables that we have been reading for a number of Sundays, and go back to Matthew's recounting of the daily life of Jesus. Matthew tells us of an attempt to entrap Jesus, a set-up by the religious and political leaders of the Jewish nation. Most of us have heard of the Pharisees and know that they were literalists and sticklers when it came to obeying the religious laws. The Herodians were another group, religious but certainly not the fanatics that Pharisees tended to be. The significant thing about the Herodians was that they were staunch supporters of the puppet king, Herod, and therefore supporters of the Roman occupation of Judaea. Neither group was responsive to our Lord's call to holiness, even if for very different reasons. Both groups stood to gain if they could find a way to silence Jesus. Shared needs often make for strange bedfellows!

In the gospel reading today, both groups questioned Jesus, wanting to entrap him. They wanted to entangle him in a no-win confrontation between faith and religious doctrine and the political realities of his world. They said to him, "Tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The issue was whether Jewish religious law, *Torah*, allowed the payment of taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of our Lord's day, argued that to pay tribute to Caesar, who claimed to be divine, was to worship an idol in violation of God's law. The question was a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" sort of thing. To say, "Yes, pay the tax," would leave Jesus subject to claims that he neglected God's absolute demand for loyalty, a demand literally set in stone, in the Ten Commandments, that Israel must have no God but Yahweh. On the other hand, to say, "No, don't pay the tax," would be to incite rebellion against Rome. Jesus was not about to be entrapped so easily. He said, "Hand me a coin. Now tell me, whose image is on the coin?" Of course the image was that of the Roman emperor, because the coin was a Roman coin. Rome required that the tax be paid in Roman currency, not Jewish currency. Looking at the coin, Jesus said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

The answer allowed Jesus to escape the trap. He denied neither God nor Caesar. Interpretation of this story, over the years, has ranged anywhere from supporting government, even when government conflicts with the laws of God and the moral expectations of Christianity, to insisting that what Jesus was really doing was telling us that church and state must be separate. Neither of these things was on the mind of Jesus and he was making no political statement. The question that Jesus both asked and answered was "What is truly important? What really matters in life?" Rome occupied Judaea, to the dislike of the religious Jews, but did Rome bring them great harm? How important is squabbling over something like paying taxes to Caesar compared with something that really counts, something like one's relationship to God? Jesus said, in so many words, that if Caesar's image is on the coin, the coin belongs to Caesar, so give it to him. It is only money. It is a tangible, but transient thing. The question to be asked is while Caesar's image may be stamped on the Roman coin, whose image is stamped on you? You are a human being, and though your body may be a tangible and transient thing, your soul is neither tangible nor transitory, and your soul is the one thing about you that lasts, either in heaven or hell, forever. God, Jesus taught, by his very act of creating you and giving you life, marks you as his own. The question to be concerned about is whether you give yourself to God, whether you truly recognize that you are his? The psalmist tells us, in the pastoral language of the Bible, that "we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." Do we understand this? Do we give ourselves to God?

In some traditions, as part of the baptism liturgy, the priest, or pastor makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person immediately after the baptism. When this is done, it is common for the pastor to say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." The symbolism is clear: the person baptized has been branded with the mark of Almighty God, the Cross of the Savior. It is not unlike branding a calf, so that people know to whom the animal belongs. It tells rustlers to stay away. The sign of the Cross on the forehead of individual tells the devil to stay away, because this person is God's own child and God takes, with deadly seriousness, anything or anyone who would take his child away. This is the point that we need to remember, always. By our baptisms, we are marked as Christ's own, marked as one for whom our Savior died. We belong to God. Our baptism has grafted us into his family. We believe that, in our baptism, we died to self and have new life only in Christ. As the Roman coin carried the image of Caesar, so we bear the image and likeness of God, indelibly stamped on our souls. We are truly marked as Christ's own, marked as one for whom our Savior died. We belong to God. Our baptism has grafted us into his family. We believe that, in our baptism, we died to self and have new life only in Christ. As the Roman coin carried the image of Caesar, so we bear the image and likeness of God, indelibly stamped on our souls. Hear the words of Jesus, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." *Amen.*