

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, October 18, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

“The Chicken or the Egg”

Nobody loves a trick question – and so I will come right out with – is it pronounced Thessalonica or Thessalonica? Are you a Bible scholar? Some may be. You know one that is nothing more than a trap might be, “which came first – the chicken or the egg?” In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus was being set up by people who wanted to place Him in a corner between siding with those from the Temple, who opposed the oppression by the Romans or those who supported them. Jesus' Godly wisdom is demonstrated throughout the entire 22nd chapter of Matthew's Gospel, handling questions to keep His opponents on their toes. By the way, this event is also reported in Luke 20:20-26 and Mark 12:13-17. It is really simple: if it appears in more than one of the Gospels – there should be no argument – take it to the bank! Once is true – twice is really true, and three times is really, really, really true – Gospel truth. A good example is “holy, holy, holy.” To say something is holy once – is OK it is holy, to say it is holy, holy – yes I agree. To say it is holy, holy, holy – get out of the way – it is the holiest.

This one, which the Pharisees put to Jesus, had an obvious double edge. The issue of paying tax to the Roman emperor was one of the hottest topics in the Middle East in Jesus' day. Jesus is confronted by two groups: the Pharisees and the Herodians. Pharisees were all about the Temple, the Law, and the kingdom of the Jews, and the Herodians were supporters of Herod, the king of the Galilee and Peraea, who was put in power by the Romans. They worked together only when it suited them best – to get something! Testing Jesus' teaching here should not be a surprise at all. Jesus was not afraid to answer any question ever posed to Him – and proved that here.

If Jesus publicly takes the view of those who are called “Zealots” (serving no king but God,) the Herodians can have him arrested on the spot. If Jesus rejects that view, which is the case; He may compromise and weaken His following of disciples. The third choice – tell the people they do not have to pay taxes at all – and then Jesus would be put to death! The Pharisees and Herodians question, therefore, was a ‘loaded question’ that would mean big problems if Jesus said anything negative about taxes.

Let us face it, the religious leaders had just one goal: to get rid of Jesus of Nazareth as fast as they could. They wanted Jesus of Nazareth – dead! They would do this through any means possible, even if it meant cooperating with lifelong enemies. The Pharisees were the “legalists” of the nation who opposed Rome and all attempts by Rome to intrude into the Jewish way of life. The Herodians actively supported the rule of Herod and favored making changes with the times as dictated by Rome. But those issues were less important to them than the pressing issue of getting rid of this Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth, so they sent a team of people to try to trick Jesus.

It is important for us to understand that the area near Jerusalem circulated its own copper coins, without the image of the emperor, which was totally offensive to Jewish tastes – but they

were still considered Roman coins. Foreign coins, which bore the emperor's image and mention of his 'godly status,' were also in circulation, in the area where neither gold nor silver coins were permitted to be minted. The silver denarius, probably minted in Lyon, was the required coin to pay taxes in Judea and other places in the Roman empire, and Jewish people had to use it whether they liked it or not. The issue of paying tax to the Roman emperor was one of the hottest topics in all of the Middle East during Jesus' day.

These clever questioners began by complimenting Jesus – and they were laying it on “pretty thick” by saying: *‘Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men because you pay no attention to who they are.’* (Matthew 22:16) They then get to the carefully laid trap and ask Jesus: *“Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”* (Matthew 22:17) The Pharisees' plan to entrap Jesus failed because Jesus aptly sidestepped the trap they forced on Him. Jesus gave His disciples an example of how they could live as the people of God's kingdom living in a yet imperfect world which was governed by secular authorities. Jesus spoke plainly when He told them that it is right to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Jesus was not a Zealot or revolutionary looking to overthrow the Roman empire, but at the same time, He did not put priority upon loyalty to the secular government. Loyalty to Caesar must always be seen in relationship to the full submission of yourself to God. The bottom line for the disciple of Jesus is to *“give to God the things that are His.”* To clearly define what belongs to God – we need only to look at Psalm 24. Ultimately the answer is clear in Psalm 24:1 *“The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.”*

Now let us get back to the trap that was laid: If Jesus opposed tribute to Rome, then He could have been arrested right away as a traitor; but if He favored tribute to Caesar, He would lose the hearts of the Jews who despised their Roman oppressive rulers. They thought that the Messiah was going to come and totally obliterate their oppressors. That was not the case – at least not yet. Jesus' reply shows that the true child of God has obligations both to God and to his country. While the image of Caesar was imprinted on the coin – the Image of God was imprinted on the hearts of all of mankind; since we are made in His image – although distorted by sin, that image still was there – and would become clearer through the coming sacrifice of Jesus, our Lord.

It was obvious that Jesus' questioners really did not believe in Him. Their question was, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Their cleverly contrived question appeared to have no clear-cut answer. “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” Have you ever been in a situation like that? You know the old question: ‘do you still cheat on your taxes?’ How do you answer that? Answering yes or no – is incriminating. If you say yes – knock, knock – IRS – hello? If you say no – it means that you did at one time. Have you ever been asked a question like that? Pure hypocrisy. Jesus was aware of the hypocrisy in their approach and also the implications that His answer would have. And so, He answered their question by showing that government does have a rightful place in everyone's life and that you can be in subjection to government and God at the same time. Where does your heart lie? It is said if you look on your checkbook –

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you can see where your heart lies. Jesus asks them to show Him a denarius, the tribute coin, and they show that they themselves are carrying this hated currency – despite the fact that Jews were not allowed to put images of human faces on their coins. Jesus has them right where He wants them! Caesar’s face was stamped on the coin and surrounding him was the message “*Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus*” or “*Son of God... high priest.*” Seriously, how could any good Jew happily carry something like that around?

“The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates.” (Psalms 11:5) Testing gives us a clear opportunity to grow, with God’s help. There is nothing on the face of this good earth that we can do by ourselves. We do not have the power or the strength, or the will for that matter. He tests both the righteous and the wicked. For some, God’s tests become like a refining fire, while for others they become an incinerator for destruction. We are not to ignore or defy the tests and challenges that come our way but instead we can use them as opportunities for us to grow, and we should not miss the opportunity to ask for God’s help. How many times have I stood here and told you or reminded you that one of the most powerful prayers – is “help me, Jesus.” Trusting in God and His care for us.

There are things in our lives that can scare the dickens out of us – like when the results of a test come back and they say that there is something there. What do we do? We should get on our knees – knowing that God will use all things for good – and the only thing that we can do is put our trust in Him. Help Me, Jesus!