

**Sermon: Sunday, October 22, 2023 – Matthew 22: 15-22**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

For my entire life, common circulation coins in Canada have borne the likeness of Queen Elizabeth II. Plans are still a bit vague as to when the Royal Canadian Mint will start using the image of King Charles III on our coinage, but that day will come. I mention this, because I don't give a second thought as to whose image is on our coinage, or what statement this makes. But holding a coin in my hand, bearing the image of the monarch, does help me to get inside the interchange between Jesus and his challengers in today's gospel reading.

All three of the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - place this encounter in the final days of Jesus' life, after Palm Sunday, and after Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers. In the Jesus narrative, then, this was not a casual question asked just any-old-time. Jesus had come to Jerusalem, had caused quite a commotion with the powers-that-be, and those powers in essence moved in for the kill. One more brash move by Jesus and his opponents would have all they needed to have him silenced for good.

The Pharisees, who hated Rome, got together with the Herodians, who colluded with Rome through their support of the wretched King Herod. In most things they were enemies but they had one thing in common: they detested Jesus. And so they asked him a question, wrapped up in the flowery language of the insincere: "Teacher,' they said, 'we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. <sup>17</sup> Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax<sup>[a]</sup> to Caesar or not?" (Matthew 22: 16-17)

His opponents think they have cornered Jesus. If Jesus denounced the paying of taxes it would be treasonous, and given that he was one false move away from being executed by the state, to speak his dissent aloud would be the end of him. Yet, as a person well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, to approve paying taxes to an Emperor regarded as Divine, would be akin to bowing down before a graven image and disobeying the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment. You can just about see the high-fives between the Herodians and the Pharisees at asking such a clever question.

But Jesus, in true Rabbinic form, answers their question with a question. "<sup>19</sup> 'Show me the coin used for the tax'." He said to them, "And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?'<sup>21</sup> They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'" or in the old King James version, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's".

In Jerusalem, in a ridiculously intense week, Jesus deftly turns aside a huge verbal challenge. In his heart, he understood himself in a full-on relationship with God in which everything precious, everything meaningful, has already been spoken for. Genesis 1:27 speaks of us being "created in the image and likeness of God" and Jesus fully got that. So sure, reasons Jesus, why not take this horrid, idolatrous coin to pay that horrid, self-important Emperor? Paying the tax with the required currency would keep you from getting arrested, but did not claim any allegiance from your heart. Jesus asks his opponent for a Roman coin – implying that he didn't have one himself - holds that coin in his hand, and in essence says, "sure, I'll pay your tax – but that's ALL you get. God already has what matters."

As I recall the way I've preached this text over the years, I've usually ended up wrestling with the question of civic duty, and how we balance our call as Christians with the things we are

called to be and do as citizens. Frankly, I don't even know what language I would use to engage that anymore, with the false binary that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic that blamed the state for things they had no responsibility for and claimed religious persecution where there was none. Fortunately, there is something else tugging at my sleeve today, wanting to be heard and articulated.

Two weeks ago, I started doing a program that the United Church of Canada has been offering for the past couple of years, entitled "40 Days of Engagement of Anti-Racism." Each day, someone writes about an aspect of racism and their personal experience of it and each Tuesday there is a Zoom session. The authors and presenters are of different ages, different ethnicities, and because they speak from personal experience there is always something to consider. Some of the language takes a while to internalize – terms like racism and white privilege and white fragility – but one term that came up repeatedly in this week's reflections and in last Tuesday's online panel really speaks to my heart and, I believe, brings us close to what Jesus was pointing to in his "render unto Caesar" reply.

The term, is colonialism, and the ways in which I easily, automatically and invisibly slip into the ease of carrying that colonial mindset. For all the positive person-by-person reasons why this land was settled by my European ancestors, such as famine or the escape from true religious persecution, there were some bigger nationalist agendas afoot. The biggest reasons for feeling that Europeans had the right to expand their holdings, were (1) that white Christian nations assumed themselves to be smarter, better, more fully developed, and closer to God, than anyone else; and (2) that because of this, other lands previously uninhabited by such cultured and genteel folks, would in some way be "improved" in the very act of being claimed and settled in the name of the crown and, supposedly, by the grace and pleasure of God. Speakers in last Tuesday's Zoom presentation spoke of other closely-related hierarchical assumptions which travel so closely with a colonial mindset, so close that we might as well view them as on. As a white, straight male, in my 60s and with a good Anglo surname, educated and employed and housed and physically able, I enjoy built-in advantages whether I actively seek them or not. Call it a colonial mindset, call it privilege, call it Empire, call it what you wish, it's a thing that some of us get to use to our advantage, while others are ineligible to do so. And as Amy Haynes, one of the presenters last Tuesday noted, colonialism is insidious; we *all* have the ability to reproduce it.

Numerous authors this week – people of colour, recent immigrants, gay and trans authors, and those who like me who tend to benefit from all this – named the colonial reality that gives automatic advantages and sets up systems that protect those advantages, as being contrary to God's yearnings for the world. Particularly poignant, to me, are the perspectives of Indigenous people, for whom every coin bearing the image of a colonial monarch is a painful reminder of how traditional cultures worldwide have suffered at the hands of colonialism. To me, this all reeks of making sure that Caesar gets paid while God's especially beloved ones, those who have few of this world's resources, are the ones actually paying it...and yet these are human limitations, not holy ones. Recalling once more the words of Amy Haynes, God does not rely on systems of hierarchy; the God who led the Hebrew people out of enslavement is "a God who makes a way out of no way."

As Jesus holds a coin in his hand, and looks at the image of Caesar, and considers what it means to be under the thumb of a colonial power – in his case, Rome – I envision him asking the same kinds of questions asked by the participants in the 40 Day program. As people who believe in a God whose love is universal – for all people, for all living beings, for the planet itself – how can we truly express our commitment to those things while also living within this

system that gives such easy advantage to some, at the expense of others? As I imagine Jesus holding a Roman coin in his hand, in that emotionally charged setting mere days before his crucifixion, and using that coin as an object lesson about where our hearts are held, I hear his answer to the Pharisees and Herodians in a new way.

If I view a colonial mindset as my Caesar, if I view the lingering effects of colonialism as the imperial entity that wants to control life – then I can happily say that I owe that entity nothing. As a child of God, as one shaped in God’s image, infused with God’s desire for barrier-breaking love, all of me, my heart, my soul, my mind, my strength, belongs to God. As a child of God, designed to live in a community founded in justice and equity, all of me lives for the dignity of my neighbours: my neighbours in the Bow Valley and my neighbours in need in all the world. Without exception, without advantage, Jesus promises and inaugurates a new and eternal way that liberates us from being enslaved to our colonial ways of being. The saving power of Christ strives to reconcile us with one another and with our shared human connection with God, freeing us from the enslavement to colonial, hierarchical ways, freeing us from the automatic advantages that are so much part of our human structures and so completely outside the ways of God.

That which bears the image of Caesar – well, he can have it. That which bears the image of God – well, that is the gift of life, to be lived in the new ways of the Kin-Dom of God. Thanks be to God for all of this, and thanks be to Christ Jesus for challenging our old ways of thinking and being. Amen.

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