

Sermon Archive 314

Sunday 18 October, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 22: 15-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Jangling about against your keys in your pocket, a coin. Handed over the counter at the coffee shop, a coin. Jammed in the slot of a parking metre, making it impossible to work even though it's at the only remaining empty parking spot in town, a coin. Fallen down the back of a couch, a coin. In the one third full piggy bank of a child saving for something special, a coin. Fallen onto the footpath, until someone has a lucky day, a coin. Although the point is less easily made in these days of electronic money transfer and an increasingly cash-free economy, still you get the point. These little tokens bearing the image of the Emperor have been everywhere. And even if they're not so much anymore, other tokens, other carriers of the image, other things stamped with the likeness of the Emperor (words, actions, inclinations) fill the world - to its corners. The image of the Emperor asserting presence, maybe claiming ownership.

Before he sets us thinking about what **other** image may be present in the world, Jesus makes the simple point that if it looks like the Emperor, it comes from the Emperor and belongs to the Emperor. Have you heard the expression "if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck . . ."?

I want us to go for a bit of a look around our world - looking for images. But first, let us pray.

-ooOoo-

Yes, it was common practice for Roman Emperors to begin their Imperial rule by minting a supply of coins with the new Emperor's image on it. And it was a deliberate strategy for telling the people whose world they lived in. Reminders of the Emperor, and of his ownership found their way into all parts of the world - well all parts where money was a feature of life. (People without money had

other ways to be reminded of Roman authority - like the images on tunics of the soldiers occupying the area.). But the coins, carrying the image they did, said "Behold the man to whom you belong". Objects in the world speak of ownership.

How about non-objects? Actions . . . Back to those soldiers. When the soldiers, during the rule of Vespasian, marched into Jerusalem and totally destroyed the temple there, was that a bearing of the likeness of, a carrying the image of the Emperor? Did this deed belong to the Emperor? As the soldiers did it, did they become a part of the will of the Emperor? Did their deed indicate that they were in the pocket of the Emperor, belonging to him? Well, since they were doing it on his orders, one would have to say "yes".

How about this one then? A group of soldiers are on prisoner guard duty. They have in their custody one Jewish man who's been accused of blasphemy - not a crime as such to any Roman sensibility, but this blasphemy carries the seeds of alternative loyalty and the possibility of civil unrest. So he's in their custody. Does this bear the image of the Emperor? Does it belong to the Emperor? I think, insofar as it's in harmony with the processes of Roman law, the answer is "yes, this is a deed of the Emperor". Well, how about when they, in the conduct of their duties, start to beat and mock the man in their custody? When they dress him in an Imperial purple cloak, and crown him with thorns. Is that a deed of the Emperor - and expression of his image? Some staunch critics of the Emperor would say "yes; this is Rome's real nature exposed". Others would say "No, this is a case of sadists going rogue - stepping well beyond any proper Imperial function". Probably though, whether it belongs to the Emperor depends on what kind of a culture the Emperor is building, and what the Emperor does afterwards once the prisoner is dead. The coins, with the Emperor's image on them, are all around the world - to its every corner. The coins are saying that the world is being formed by, and belongs to, and manifests the will of, the Emperor. If the Emperor owns the world, then to whom does the death of an innocent man belong?

An interesting contemporary case of crime and empire: four uniformed police officers in Minneapolis, in the course of their work, leaned on the

neck of George Floyd until he died. Was this a rogue act, or did it belong to the State? The police officer most directly involved was fired the next day - so the State appeared to be saying "that was not our work he was doing". When he was placed in custody, awaiting trial, perhaps that was the State reiterating its distancing. When he was released on bail (and is freely moving around his community today), what does that say? Maybe it's just the judicial process working its way through a case. Others, though, have wanted to ask questions about the culture within which the police officers did what they did. What kind of forces were forming them? What is the nature of the Emperor of these actions? Whose image is stamped upon them?

One plea for these sorts of questions to be asked, within the broader Black Lives Matter movement, came from the sporting community. Many American athletes, mainly African American, from many different sporting codes, took up the practice of "taking a knee", kneeling during the singing of the national anthem at the start of the game. It was a gesture calling for more talk about the nature of the Empire that was claiming them. It was their way of calling for the building of a society in a different image. Interestingly, their head of state, in response, described them as un-American, failures in patriotism. Caesar was critical.

I am of the view that when people are outraged by the cruel death of one human being at the hands of another human being, then an image other than Caesar's is being circulated. I am of the view that when people bend a knee in concern for who we are being encouraged to be, then an image other than Caesar's is being revealed. It looks like a duck. It swims like a duck. It quacks like a duck. The image of the Emperor is revealed in the world in obvious ways. It's got Caesar stamped all over it. Jesus says "find me a coin. Whose image is on it? To whom then does it belong?" Then he talks about the other One, the One in whose image we are said to be made, the one whose image is born into the world as we speak, as we act, as we reveal our loyalties.

Can I tell you that when I see a small group of people gathering in a church for the funeral of a friend, and when they find courage to speak, with great

vulnerability, about how they have loved the person they have lost - and when they do this because human life needs celebrating, I see the image of God stamped on that.

When a registered nurse spends time with an elderly Pasifika person, and hands are held, and common language is spoken, so that things aren't so frightening anymore, I see the image of God stamped on that.

When food is put into offering baskets, so it may be eaten by those who have little food at the moment, I see the image of God stamped on that.

These are small tokens in the world - in our local world - that the world belongs to One who is full of loving-kindness and grace. These are little reminders (in our pockets, on our lips, across the counter, lost down the back of the couch) of the One to whom we belong. They are to be found in every corner of our world - when we go looking for them with the eyes of Christ. Whose image is on it? Where has it come from? To whom does it belong? Jesus says it's pretty simple. It swims like a duck - the face is revealed. We rejoice in the revealing, and give to God what belongs to God.

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.