

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev'd John Maxwell Kerr
Sunday, October 16, 2011

It's so easy! Everyone loves this morning's effort-saving Gospel, especially idle preachers such as ourselves! For us, this Gospel reading is a gift. Such a sermon fits the Great Christian Tradition that the Gospel is a cure for insomnia on Sunday mornings (or evenings).

However, first a disclaimer. Anyone with any literary taste *at all* must prefer "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Instead, we must now endure, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God, the things that are God's." This leaden version is an attempt to make the Gospel "relevant"; to put it into TODAY'S MODERN ENGLISH, as spoken by those in whom the breath of poetry has never breathed. Thus, the Gospel begins its slow slide into dullness and inanity. Who says translation doesn't matter? Avoiding that literary pitfall, then, let *us* think of today's Gospel as proclaiming, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."

And preach on! Sleepers awake! Now, please.

We *could*, following Penny's excellent method last Sunday, discuss the actual physical heads-and-tails, the obverse and reverse images you'd find on a coin from this period used as Temple Tax. The sesterce or perhaps even the drachma. This counts as truly Biblical preaching in some places: Bible knowledge! Bible knowledge!

However, let's not, because this is trivializing the Gospel.

We *could*, also, discuss that matter so essential to the present well-being of your soul, the monetary policy for funding the Temple in Jerusalem approved by the Romans in the first century of the Christian era.

We *could*. However, let's not, even though the funding of religious institutions, even individual churches such as this, begins to figure in sermons at this time of the budgetary year. What preacher doesn't see an opportunity in "Temple Tax" for a sermon about funding the institution! One need not mention "stewardship," and so one will **not**.

All that minute, detailed clutter that makes the Gospel episode so real to antiquarian coin-collectors and economic historians of the provinces of the eastern Roman Empire, is boring. It's only advantage is that one can sleep through such a sermon, even while delivering it, to say nothing of listening to it. And is just why so many young adults, University students, in particular, say they are spiritual not religious. No kidding. Can you blame them if we foist them off with this tripe?

What if we really wanted to feel the prophetic power of the Gospel now, as immediately as when Jesus spoke? We could start with Bishop Holly. When Holly was the Rector here, he preached a theologically-correct sermon on today's Gospel: the coin, the Temple, the Pharisees, the disciples, the Emperor (that Roman Imperial figure formerly known as Caesar); everything and everyone, all of them

and all of us, actually belong to **God, the Creator and Redeemer of all**. Our money, too, is not *ours*, except to use in God's service for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God. It is God's money, all of it. All that is Caesar's is already God's: there is no choice here. That's what Bishop Holly said. That's what Jesus was saying. That was, and is, the Gospel.

Jesus' careful answer reveals a truth we need to hear. "Stop thinking in terms of your money: It's not yours. Mine is not mine. Nor is it Caesar's. Nor Uncle Sam's. Nor Wall Street's. Nor is it the property of "banks too big to fail." It is God's, and it is our privilege to use it responsibly. We can't take it with us: we know that. Believe it, because it is true.

So instead of looking at tiny coins, let us look at Jesus. A former student of mine told our seminar group that she thought Jesus took the coin in with a brief glance. That's all it took. Then his eyes moved to the hand holding the coin, and then looked right into the eyes of his questioner. Then he said, "Whose image and likeness is this?" You've heard that statement before. You've heard it in the Creation narrative. God says of all humans that they are created in the "image and likeness ... of God."

Imagine Jesus standing in front of you right now, looking right into your eyes. You are holding a nickel: on the coin it says "In God we trust." But Jesus knows we don't. So what would Jesus do? What would Jesus say to you or me?

In this Gospel reading, a group of Pharisees set out to entrap the Lord. Once again, they ask one of those two-pronged questions. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

The answer "Yes" means Jesus is a traitor to Judaism, a sell-out to the cult of the Emperor, a quisling, if you remember what that is. Were our Lord to answer "No," that would equally be grounds to have Jesus denounced to the secret police.

So Jesus does that famous move in logic, when confronted with the horns of a false either-or dilemma: he refuses to play. Our Lord doesn't accept the either-or with which he is confronted and goes for an option his accusers have not considered. Jesus is like that.

One reason he, our Lord Jesus Christ, is so attractive generation after generation, is that Jesus does trust in God. He never loses his poise with individuals or even groups of accusers or even whole societies, political parties, media moguls. He doesn't play other peoples' games. He sees intuitively through what they are playing at, and is creative in finding the truth. Jesus is a fascinating and attractive personality: he deals honestly and creatively with aggression, with angry or coldly treacherous confrontation, with attempts to have him betray himself, with other peoples' fears, and griefs. He always remains true to himself. Jesus lives as if he trusts in God.

In not one verse in any of the four Gospels, at no time whatsoever, does Jesus ever, ever whine. There is no taint of self-pity, entitlement, nor any desperate need for security at any price. He is perfectly willing to speak for himself without having a lawyer present. He never takes the Fifth Amendment. He has moral courage. And in the moral desert in which we live, Jesus comes genuinely as a revelation to those who meet him for the first time. In God he trusts.

This Gospel reading cries out for us all to read and reread it afresh. Look! Listen! Study Jesus! Listen to Jesus, as if for the first time. Follow Jesus and not just on Twitter. Really *follow Jesus*.

No-one will ever respond to the power of this Gospel by hearing a sermon about sesterces and Roman monetary policy, or even U.S. government policy. The atheists know better. They know there is something fascinating in Jesus, and they find him compelling, attractive, honest and real.

Someday, maybe today, an atheist, or one of the huge numbers of people who say they are spiritual but not religious, will hold a nickel in her hand. She will look at the nickel, and she will read what it says: "In God we trust." What if she then comes to this Church to look for evidence that we mean that. Our task, our evangelical task as Bruton Parish Church [or Canterbury], is to make sure that by our deeds, values and lifestyle, she will see that evidence and want to be set free like us to trust in God by the truth of the Gospel.

Amen