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Giving to God what is God's (Matthew 22: 15-33)

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In tonight's reading, we continue to follow Matthew's gospel as he takes us on Jesus' final journey into Jerusalem. He arrived, riding on a donkey to signify his claim to Davidic kingship, and has since been challenged by the chief priests and elders: 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?' (Matt 21:23). Jesus has so far answered them in parables, which they recognised were told against them and for which they wanted to arrest him. But they were afraid of the crowds who supported Jesus. Now we have two further attempts to entrap Jesus, to make him say things that will show either that he is not worthy of being a prophet or Davidic king, or that he is a revolutionary against Rome. The question of his authority is still alive.

As we read these chapters in Matthew we can feel the tension building. The rope being wound around Jesus is tightening. The sense of threat is palpable. And since we know that Jesus dies, it is just a matter of how and when he is finally entrapped. It is a tragedy unfolding – or so it seems at this point, and would be, except for the resurrection, which casts the whole story in a different light. This is the larger context in which to understand tonight's reading – a point along the way to his death and resurrection.

Let's take the challenge of the payment of taxes first. The Pharisees, back in Matt 12:14, had already conspired to destroy Jesus, so their approaching him here is a continuation of their plotting against him. This time they are joined by unlikely partners, some 'Herodians', who supported Herod and the authority given him by Rome. The question that both parties bring to Jesus is a clever one. After flattering him with compliments, they ask: 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?' The Pharisees and their followers resented paying taxes to their Roman overlords. They expected anyone worthy of a claim to Jewish kingship would not only oppose the tax

but would become the king instead of Caesar, thus abolishing the tax altogether. Why follow him if they remain under Caesar?

On the other hand, two decades earlier, the Roman empire had violently quashed a Jewish rebellion, including a revolt against paying taxes to Rome, and crucified its ring-leaders. If Jesus had said that they should *not* pay taxes to Rome, the Herodians could arrest and execute him for being a revolutionary. It was quite the trap.

Jesus first sees through them and their malicious intent. 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?' He sees them as hypocrites because they pretend to admire his sincerity and integrity, his non-partiality and truth, yet instead of believing in him they plot to destroy him. Jesus will have a lot more to say about hypocrisy in Matt 23. Watch this preaching space!

Jesus' response side-steps the direct question. He asks for a coin used for the tax. They produce one. He then asks whose head and inscription are on the coin? While we talk of a coin having a 'head' and 'tail' side, the Greek word translated here as 'head' is 'image', or more precisely, 'icon'. Whose image is on the coin? It is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament for the creation account, where humanity is made in the image, or as an icon, of God. Matthew does not make much of this point, but he implies a link, which later interpreters have developed.¹

The first part of Jesus' answer, to 'give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's', establishes that it is not unlawful to pay taxes, and since the coin belongs to Caesar – well give it back to him. Then, unasked for, Jesus adds a statement that puts the challenge back on them: 'and give to God the things that are God's'. This implies, with that Genesis reference, that we are stamped with God's image, thus we should give to God our whole selves.

Since one of Matthew's themes is that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, then his answer here accuses his questioners. If they did give to God what is God's, they would have followed Jesus, rather than attempt to entrap and destroy him.

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2005, p. 63.

Giving to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's seems like a simple solution. Except that it is not so easy to discern what belongs to whom. Matthew himself taught that no-one can serve two masters; 'you cannot serve God and wealth' (Matt 6:24). The text in Matt 22 is not about public life being divorced from our private religion, though it has been interpreted that way. Rather, it offers Jesus' listeners, and Matthew's readers, a problem. If we belong to God's kingdom, what does that mean for our political and social lives as well as our personal ones? How do we give to God what is God's while living under other empires that are mostly in tension with God's ways? Stanley Hauerwas says that to discern this problem is to start to follow Jesus. If we think we don't have a problem, then we have a problem. It is up to Christians in each time and place to work this problem out together.²

That Jesus makes 'giving to God what is God's' a priority over 'giving to the emperor what is the emperor's', is evident from the context of this story, told as Jesus heads towards his own crucifixion, thus joining the fate of the rebels before him. As Tom Wright points out, he was not trying to avoid the danger in this clash of kingdoms, but was proceeding on his own terms. Against some expectations, he was not going to be a revolutionary king, who would overthrow the Roman empire. In Wright's words: 'The kingdom of God *would* defeat the kingdom of Caesar, not by conventional means but by the victory of God's love and God's power over the even greater empire of death itself. And that's what the next story is all about'.³

So we turn now to the Sadducees' question to Jesus. We don't know much about the Sadducees, except that they did not believe in the resurrection, and they gave authority only to the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures: the Torah. Here they try to show how ridiculous belief in the resurrection is, and thus show Jesus up for teaching it. They choose an example from the Torah on Levirate marriage,

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2006, p. 191.

³ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2, Chapters 16–28*, SPCK, London, 2002, p. 88.

whereby a woman marries a man, and when he dies, she marries each of his brothers in succession, according to Levirate law. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

Jesus' response challenges their authority: 'you are wrong for you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God'. Next, he clarifies the nature of resurrection – we will be different, we will be transformed. There will be no need for marriage since there will be no need for procreation, which we need when we are mortal. God makes us new in some way.

Finally, Jesus quotes Moses back to the Sadducees, using an unexpected text. 'Have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"?' This quote is from Ex 3:6, where God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, from which God is then revealed as 'I am'. Whatever else 'I am' means as a name, it is the verb to be in its present tense. There is nothing dead and gone in this name, and no limits put on it. This is a God of unquenchable life, aliveness without qualification.

While God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and they are dead, God is described as being presently their God: 'I am', the present tense, not 'I was' their God. So, they must somehow be alive in him. Jesus concludes, 'He is God not of the dead, but of the living'. God has power even over death, and the nature of that power is to save, redeem, to make all things new.

If we put these two stories together we find they illuminate each other. As we try to discern what it means to give to God the things that are God's, we learn that God's ways are life-giving and saving, even in the face of death. Our calling, as ones stamped with the image of God, is to live our lives from that kingdom of unquenchable life, not from any rule that is driven by death. We are called to follow Jesus, the true image of God, and be transformed more and more into that image. His death and resurrection attest to the power of the living God to bring life and forgiveness out of death and destruction.

What our calling means in any particular time and place needs to be discerned. There are no easy rules or abstract principles to guide us. But we do have the scriptures, which need interpreting. We have the Christian community, past and present, from whose wisdom we may learn. And we have the living God as our guide. As we give to God what is God's, we pray that God will move in, through and among us, enabling us to see with God's eyes, feel with God's heart, and live from God's abundant and generous life.