Sermon: Whose Image Do We Bear?

Matthew 22:15–33

Have you ever been asked a question when you knew that the person asking it wasn't really interested in your answer? They had already made up their mind. They were simply looking for an opportunity to catch you out.

That is what is happening in today's Gospel.

The Pharisees and the Herodians are trying to trap Jesus. They ask whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. It is a carefully constructed question. If Jesus says yes, he risks offending those who resent Roman occupation. If he says no, he risks being accused of rebellion against the emperor.

They think they have him cornered.

But Jesus sees through their intentions. He asks them to show him a coin and then asks whose image is on it. When they answer, "Caesar's," Jesus replies:

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

And Matthew tells us that when they heard this, they were amazed. They had come to trap Jesus, but instead they encountered wisdom that they could neither anticipate nor easily dismiss.

There is something here for us as Christians today.

We live in a world where speaking about faith can sometimes feel difficult. Christian convictions can be misunderstood, challenged or dismissed. Sometimes we may be tempted to stay silent because we fear saying the wrong thing, causing offence, or being drawn into an argument we cannot win.

But Jesus shows us that speaking faithfully does not mean accepting the terms of every argument presented to us. Nor does it mean responding to hostility with hostility.

Jesus does not simply choose one side of the political argument. He exposes the limitations of the question itself. He responds with clarity, courage and wisdom. He refuses to be manipulated, and he directs attention to something much more important than the trap that has been set for him.

Perhaps that is part of our calling as Christians: not to have an opinion on everything, or to win every argument, but to speak with the wisdom that comes from our faith. To be prepared to speak when something matters, to stand alongside those who are vulnerable, to challenge injustice, and to do so with grace and integrity.

We may not always amaze our listeners as Jesus did! But we can seek to speak in ways that reflect the character of Christ rather than the anger, fear or contempt that so often characterise public debate.

And then there is the heart of Jesus' answer: "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

The coin bears Caesar's image. So, Jesus says, give it back to Caesar.

But what bears the image of God?

The answer takes us back to the very beginning of Scripture, to Genesis, where we are told that God created humankind in God's own image.

We bear the image of God.

And that changes the question entirely.

If the coin bears Caesar's image, it can be returned to Caesar. But we bear God's image. Our lives belong to God.

We cannot simply give God a little of our time, a portion of our income, or an hour on Sunday morning and consider our obligations fulfilled. Those things may be important expressions of our faith, but Jesus' words invite us to something much more profound.

God asks for us.

God asks for our minds and our hearts, our gifts and our relationships, our work and our service. God asks us to live in ways that reflect the

image we bear: to love our neighbours, to seek justice, to show mercy, to forgive, and to bring hope to the people and communities around us.

This is not about earning God's love. It is about responding to the God whose image we bear and whose love has already claimed us.

And the second part of our Gospel reading reinforces this hope. When the Sadducees question Jesus about the resurrection, he reminds them that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

The God to whom we belong is the living God, whose faithfulness is stronger than death itself.

So we need not be afraid to offer ourselves to God. We belong to the One who created us, loves us and calls us into life.

The question for us, then, is not simply whether we are giving Caesar what belongs to Caesar. It is whether our lives are reflecting the image of the God to whom we belong.

When we speak, do our words bear God's image? When we act, do our actions reflect God's love? When we encounter people who disagree with us, do we respond with the courage and wisdom of Christ?

We may not be able to control the questions others ask, or the traps they set, or how they respond to our answers. But we can choose whose image we will reflect.

We bear the image of God. May we offer ourselves to God, and may our lives make that image visible to the world.

Amen.