

Trinity 19 Year A (29th OT) 2017

The young American black poet and philosopher Criss Jami says in one of his works: “Always seek justice, but love only mercy. To love justice and hate mercy is but a doorway to more injustice.” The Pharisees of Jesus’ day are living out the latter. They are angry, fearful, and perhaps embarrassed. Jesus – a mere carpenter from Galilee – is causing them grief.

It’s Holy Week in today’s gospel. Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem and goes to the temple where he drives out the merchants and overthrows the money changers’ tables. Then he calls everyone dealing in the Temple compound thieves, and to make matters worse heals the lame and blind. No wonder the chief priests and scribes angry – they are meant to be the guardians of the Holy Places. ‘Who do you think you are?’ ‘By what authority are you doing these things’ are the questions on their lips. He doesn’t answer them. Instead he tells them a story about tenants of a vineyard who steal from the landlord and murder his son. **They** realize he is not talking about tenants of a vineyard. He is talking about them. Jesus tells them another story. This one is about a wedding banquet, the kind they would be invited to. But the story doesn’t end the way they expect. One of the guests who is silent gets tied up and thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Enough is enough, and the religious leaders plot how they can trap Jesus, and things are so bad that they bring in the Herodians as well. They join forces with the party that supports Rome’s domination of their own people. Politics, anger, and fear are a dangerous combination that makes for unlikely alliances. They start with flattery. ‘We know that you are true, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth,’ They show him a coin and hope that Jesus is off guard. Their question about paying taxes to the emperor is certainly clever! If Jesus says yes, he risks offending and losing his followers and all those for whom Roman taxation is a daily reminder that they are dominated by a foreign power in their own land. If he says no, he risks being charged with insurrection and treason. Rome’s supporters, the Herodians, are there as witnesses.

The truth is that this question is not about taxes, the government or the Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland. It’s about an agenda. The Pharisees and Herodians don’t care what the answer is. Either way they’ve got him.

The questions may be different but the Pharisaic-Herodian conspiracy is still a part of our world today. It’s played out every time we over simplify complex issues, categorize people, pigeon hole parts of our lives, and try to manipulate Jesus.

Is abortion permissible? Say yes and you will be seen as supporting the killing of babies, one who ignores the commandment against murder. Say no and you contradict a woman’s fundamental rights as determined by Law.

Is homosexuality lawful? Say yes and you will be labeled a revisionist, a progressive who denies the authority of Holy Scripture. Say no and you will be accused of being homophobic, prejudiced, and denying the gospel’s message of love and inclusivity.

Do you support the conflicts we have been involved with in recent decades? (our politicians call them conflicts rather than wars – it sounds less scary) Wars? Say no and you will be seen by some as unpatriotic and failing to support our troops. Say yes and you have to answer to others for the violence, death, and destruction that seem so contrary to Jesus' life and teaching.

In whatever form it takes, the Pharisaic-Herodian conspiracy is about power, manipulation, and agendas, and that always destroys relationships and undermines faith. It strikes me that this is all too evident today in our political and economic systems as well as sometimes in our very churches. Jesus, however, will not allow himself to be used, manipulated, or co-opted by anyone: the Pharisees, the Herodians, or us. He asks them whose image is on the tax coin. "The emperor's," they answer. "Then render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The problem for the Pharisees and Herodians is that this answer is unresponsive. It surely calls for a yes or no answer.

Jesus refuses to play the game. He doesn't answer their question; at least not in the way they want. Instead he deepens the question and turns it into a question of faith and life. If the coin belongs to Caesar, then the human being belongs to God. Each has been marked with the image of its owner. As Jesus called for a coin, so we have been minted in the image of God. And for us as brothers and sisters in Christ we have a special responsibility to reveal this to the world as people who have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

Knowing this, what does faithfulness look like in the issues with which you struggle? It's a hard question, one that is answered neither easily nor quickly. For most of us it is the work of a lifetime. Jesus does not offer simple yes or no type answers. Why should we? Faithfulness demands more than that. It means we are continually learning to surrender and render to God ourselves and one another. How will you do that for yourselves, those you love, your neighbour, your enemy? The key it seems is knowing to whom we belong. It's one of those answers, however, that cannot be told or taught, only experienced and learned. Faithfulness is more about struggle and practice than it is the answer. It is done at the depths of our image. Get the image right and most everything else will follow. There will always be issues to address: taxes, economics, church-state relationships, war, homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment, personal finances, marriage, children. The list will go on and on. Some are global while others are more local and personal. The danger is that in dealing with the issues we sometimes deny, confuse, or forget whose image not just **we** but also "the other" have been minted in.

In being shown that coin, Jesus says, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Jesus is not separating the secular and the sacred, spirit and matter, divine and human. He is inviting us to hold them in tension; to unite the two, and in so doing become the very currency of God's life in the world. Amen

Collect: O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Isaiah 45:1-7

45 Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him

and strip kings of their robes. to open doors before him— and the gates shall not be closed:

² I will go before you and level the mountains, ^[a] I will break in pieces the doors of bronze

and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places,

so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.

I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.

⁷ I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

1 Thessalonians 1

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For the people of those regions[b] report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.

17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?'

21 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.' 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.