***Whose image do we bear?***

Sermon preached by Revd Canon John Barr on Sunday 22nd October 2023 at the 10.30am service of Holy Communion in Waltham Church

Readings: Isaiah 45. 1-7

Matthew 22. 15-22

Does anyone watch *Question Time* on Thursday evenings? Last Thursday, it was held in Lisburn, Northern Ireland – only a few miles away from where I grew up in Belfast. Not surprisingly, the questions were focussed on the situation in Israel and Gaza, as well as the ongoing lack of devolved government in NI. It was interesting to see how the five politicians dealt with tricky questions on these topical and contentious issues.

In today’s Gospel, we’ve just heard how Jesus was put on the spot, when He was faced with a question posed about the contentious issue of whether to pay tribute money, imperial tax, to the Roman emperor. In fact, this question was a trap rather than a trick. The taxes referred to were extremely unpopular. If Jesus had said ‘Yes’, His Jewish contemporaries would have hated Him and seen Him as a traitor wanting to help the Romans. But if He had said, ‘No’, he would have been guilty of treason and been liable to arrest and execution.

Matthew tells us how Jesus dealt with the question, in a way that amazed those who heard Him: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”. Familiar words, maybe. A brilliant answer, yes. A straightforward statement, no. Rather it underlines a tension found in the Bible as to how we are to view those in positions of human authority. On the one hand, the scriptures state that the powers that be have a God-given part to play in the ordering of society, and – as such – are in constant need of our prayers. And, as this morning’s first reading reminds us, even pagan rulers like Cyrus, King of Persia, can be instruments of God’s purposes. Yet, on the other hand, when rulers abuse their position of trust, and govern unjustly, then the prophetic voice of God’s people must call them to account, and remind them that they too are subject to God.

Over recent days we have seen widespread suffering and destruction in Israel and Gaza, as a result of violence that was unleashed by Hamas - the rulers of Gaza - in evil acts of terror committed against innocent civilians. I don’t know about you, but I found it deeply disturbing that those who did this rejoiced in the murder of women, children and the elderly by crying out ‘God is great’. What sort of a God do they believe in? It is a diabolical distortion of the God who Muslims, Jews and Christians profess to worship, the One whose greatness should inspire humility and prayer and peace-making - not the rejoicing in cold blooded murder of the innocents.

Across our world today, we see many other examples of how rulers abuse the authority entrusted to them. So what, then, might we learn from Jesus about our duty to the transitory ‘Caesars’ of our day, and how this might relate to our service of the Living God, who – unlike human authorities - does not change? Well, Jesus escapes the trap that’s been set for Him by asking to be shown a coin used for the tax. Jesus reminds His questioners that the coin bears the image of the emperor, and therefore can be said to be his. But humans bear the image of God, for we are made in His image and likeness. Give to Caesar then, what is his; what belongs to a passing, temporary, human ruler with short-lived and loaned authority. Give to God, what is God’s; and what bears God’s image is us: you and me. The coin shows visibly to whom it belongs. In the same way, we are to show visibly to whom we belong - and not just a part of us sometimes, but every bit of us always.

All human beings are stamped with God’s image. So often we spoil it, yet deep down it is still there. At Baptism we are marked with the sign of the Cross, when the sign of God’s forgiveness through Christ is made on our forehead. Our Christian calling is to let the light of Christ shine in our lives, showing the reconciling love of God in Jesus to everyone. So this morning, as we reflect on the Scriptures, you and I are reminded of an unchanging truth. The truth that our highest priority is never to any employer, nor to any political party, community group, or organization. We do have responsibilities to all of these, as well as to our families and friends, our church, and our nation. But none of these is more important than our first loyalty to the Lord, the One whose image we bear. We belong to God. This week, how will you and I show that our top loyalties and priorities are given above all to the Lord whose image we bear?