

Show me the coin used for the tax

News over the past few weeks of the warfare in Israel and Palestine has made me recall my own trip to Israel in 2016 with a group from the diocese.

We visited Nazareth, where Jesus was born and raised; the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized; and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which marks the site where Jesus was crucified.

In Jerusalem, we also visited the Temple Mount, the Western Wall, and the "Old City" that is surrounded by giant stone walls that date from centuries before Christ's birth. It was a memorable visit full of history, ancient sites, and exotic flavors.

Other than the amazing holy sites and food, one of my main memories of the visit was my constant confusion over the type of currency I was supposed to use and when I was supposed to use it. Prior to the visit, I had been told that "everyone accepts the U.S. dollar", yet some merchants wanted only Israeli Shekels.

It never failed that if a store wanted shekels, I only had dollars. Yet the store next door might want dollars, but I only had shekels. And if one place was cash-less, the next location would be "cash only."

It didn't matter what form of currency I had or didn't have at any given store or restaurant - it seemed like I always had the wrong form of payment. I was never sure what currency would be needed, leaving me frustrated and confused the entire time.

So it caught my attention that today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew asks us to consider what form of currency we have, what form we need, and how and where we are supposed to use it. What does it mean to have and use God's currency, how is it earned, and where are we to spend it?

In today's reading, we meet Jesus in a moment of often-described tension between him and those in authority - in this case, the Pharisees. You may remember that this same story is also told in the gospels of Mark (12:13-17) and Luke (20:20-26).

The Pharisees were the business, political, and religious leaders of the time. They strictly policed how others in the community followed traditional religious practices.

Because of this, the Pharisees had become quite smug and self-righteous in their belief that they were the most pleasing to God, when in fact they were using their authority and rules to twist the goodness of God's laws for their own advantage.

The Pharisees weren't as concerned about the greater calling of God's love - justice, mercy, and faithfulness for all - as they were about making sure they remained in power and influence over society. They dealt in a currency of fear control over local customs and practices.

The Pharisees were becoming increasingly threatened by the community's belief that Jesus was the Messiah. The Jewish people had believed for generations that God would send a Messiah to overthrow the Roman occupation. After Jesus entered Jerusalem and triumphantly cleared the temple, the people were beginning to believe that he was their long awaited Messiah.

The Pharisees wanted to somehow discredit Jesus but at the same time they didn't want to anger the community to whom Jesus had become so popular. Somehow, under their watch, Jesus had cultivated his own valuable currency among the people, earned through his demonstrations of compassion, truth, and love:

Compassion in his healing of the lame, blind, crippled, mute, and those with a myriad of other afflictions, all of whom approached him with nothing to offer but their faith in his healing power (Matthew 15).

Truth in his message that while people like the Pharisees looked at outward appearances of compliance with the laws of scripture to judge faithfulness, God looked only at the heart (1 Samuel).

Love in his Sermon on the Mount where he described to the crowds how God blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted (Matthew 5).

The Pharisees decided to try to trap Jesus, to try to coax him into saying something treasonous that they could use to have him arrested by the Roman government.

They even enlisted the help of the Herodians, with whom they were typically at opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum. The two groups were united, however, in their opposition to Jesus' growing power. The Herodians were allies of the Roman government and were likewise determined to catch Jesus saying anything anti-Roman or anti-emperor that they could use against him..

To set the trap, the group flatters Jesus by addressing him as Teacher and lavishing him with compliments that he is uncommonly fair, impartial, and wise. Then they deliver their trick question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Roman rule was resented by many Jews throughout the region. The Jews felt that the Romans' customs and pagan religion were blatant violations of God's law, and thought that it was completely humiliating that Jews had to submit to Roman authority, including that they had to pay taxes to Rome.

On one side of the trap was for Jesus to say "yes" and affirm that the Jews should pay the taxes. This would make it appear that Jesus was anti-Jewish and pro-Roman, which would alienate him from the people and make it easier for the religious rulers to discredit him.

And if Jesus said "no, it is not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor," then he would appear to be pro-Jewish and anti-Roman, in which case they could turn Jesus over to Rome to be dealt with as an insurrectionist. With this set-up, it appeared that the Pharisees and Herodians couldn't lose.

But Jesus sidesteps the question. He asks to see what currency is used to pay Rome: "*Show me the coin used for the tax.*" Instead of answering "pay the taxes" or "don't pay the taxes," Jesus replies, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's' '.

Jesus did not come to replace Rome or to compete with the emperor for his temporary, human-empowered throne which could easily be toppled. Jesus came to establish the new, everlasting kingdom of God that could not be destroyed.

The purpose of the emperor, or any human government, is to establish order and promote justice. Jesus taught His followers to respect the emperor's authority. But no human authority could ever compete with Jesus because everything ultimately belongs to Christ.

That is why we are to render to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. We are to obey our government's laws and pay our taxes, but save our worship and devotion for God.

Jesus's clever reply answered the Pharisees' question without falling into their trap. It pleased the Jewish crowd but gave the Pharisees and Herodians nothing they could twist and use against Him.

Too often, opponents like the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the emperor see conflict as a zero-sum game: that for one side to win, the other side has to lose.

Jesus always used conflict as an opportunity to set the record straight about what God desires for his chosen people: authenticity, not hypocrisy; mercy, not sacrifice; and inclusion, not estrangement.

God's law calls us all to work for a world that is just and peaceful for all, one that is full of love and respect and one that doesn't leave anyone out. In God's kingdom, everybody wins. He has even given us the means to achieve this world; as Christians, we have been paid many times over in God's currency of the forgiveness of sins, salvation of our souls, and unconditional love.

We can spend our God-given currency in time, by sharing it with the lonely and the friendless.

We can pay our currency forward in service, by caring for the needy, the underserved, and the environment.

We can lavish it upon others in love, by forging reconciliation with those with whom we disagree and earnestly seeking understanding of others.

I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Israel but unfortunately it appears it will be some time before any of us could consider visiting there again. Let us pray for peace, for the release of captives, and for comfort of the afflicted. May we always recognize that we have the currency to forge God's kingdom, and may we never hesitate to show others whose currency we are using. Amen.

References:

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