

Sunday 22 October 2023

Liverpool Parish Church

Twentieth Sunday After Trinity

OT: Exodus 33.12-23

NT: I Thessalonians 1.1-10

Gp: Matthew 22.15-22

‘Whose image do you see? Whose epigraph?’

It is impossible to underestimate the power of images. In a virtual culture, they saturate our world. They advertise, represent, persuade, incite, rally and repel. Wars are waged over images.

The church has known its fair share of wars over images. The Reformation left its scars on church buildings: altar screens torn down, pictures removed. We can still see some of these scars in the headless statues that adorn medieval churches. But we can also go further back: thirteen hundred years ago, the Byzantine emperor Leo III took down an image of Christ from the Chalke gate, the entrance to the Great Palace of Constantinople. It encouraged a wave of destruction and removal of imagery from churches. The movement gave us the word iconoclasm: literally, the destruction of images.

The iconoclasts argued that they were being true to scripture, which prohibited any attempt to depict God or venerate images. They believed that such practices amounted to idolatry.

Over the course of the eighth century, the tide of iconoclasm ebbed and flowed. In 754 an emperor called a council which forbade images; in 787, however, the empress Irene was behind another council at Nicea, which declared ‘venerable and holy images are to be dedicated in the holy churches of God, namely the image of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our immaculate Lady the Holy Mother of God, and of the angels and all the saints.’ The council also decreed that such images were to be venerated – not worshipped as God is, but treated as means through which God is made known to our senses, as reflections and embodiments of divine glory and holiness.

That wasn’t the end of the story – iconoclasm came back in the next century – but it was a decisive chapter. For much of the Christian church, that 787 gathering in Nicea is honoured as one of the great seven ecumenical councils of the church. Anglicans are of course a bit vague about which of these great councils we honour, but they all form part of the tradition of faith we inherit as part of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church.

I mention all this not for historical interest but because it bears on the matter of our gospel reading.

It starts with an unlikely alliance: the Pharisees are a widespread movement of practical devotion to the law, encouraging an everyday holiness. The Herodians are the supporters of the rather less holy family of Herod – bullies and lackeys of Rome. Matthew aims to show a growing united opposition to Jesus across divides of religious and political loyalty.

Their question to Jesus sets a trap. If he supports paying taxes to the emperor, he is betraying the hope many might have that he would lead Israel to liberation from Rome. If he calls for a boycott of the tax, he can be denounced to the Roman authorities.

But there is more going on here than a question of political loyalty. Jesus asks them to produce a coin. In our translation, he asks ‘Whose head is this and whose title.’ A more literal translation of the Greek would be: ‘Whose icon is this and whose epigraph?’

This is a controversy over images, over icons. Why?

The coin Jesus referred to probably bore an image of Tiberius Caesar, along with an inscription that essentially said that the emperor is divine. Using the coin was not just acknowledging a foreign occupier; it carried with it the taint of idolatry, worship of the emperor.

This is why the story is so significant. Jesus asks his audience, including us: whose image do you see? It is a question that can be answered on different levels. The coin offers a picture of a historical person, of course. But more than that, it is an image, an icon of the emperor’s power and status, even their claim to be a god.

Why then does Jesus seem to support paying the tax and using the coin? He does not offer us a straightforward answer. Those who go to Jesus and to the Bible in general for answers are often missing the point. He is asking us ‘what do we see?’ Our way of seeing and interpreting the images the world throws at us is crucial. We cannot just use scripture to get ourselves off the hook. We must think and decide for ourselves.

Still, there are hints in what Jesus says: give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. But what does belong to Caesar? What does belong to God? Perhaps Jesus is saying: paying the tax does not mean you accept the emperor or the empire’s claims about its divine status. We live in a difficult and compromised world. Anyone trying to remain pure and separate from that world is kidding themselves.

So: deal with the world as it is, deal with the powers that be, without accepting their claim that they are divine, or absolute. Jesus accepts the reality of the emperor but relativises him. At the same time, give to God what is God’s. And what is God’s? Everything. All of

the world, all of life ultimately belongs to God. So no human power can set itself up as the lord of creation, demanding our total devotion. Human claims to authority are not rejected, but they must be kept firmly in their place.

Images, then, must be interpreted. Jesus seems to say: look beyond the superficial picture to the deeper reality. Government may be necessary but the emperor's divine claims are ultimately hollow. For the gospel, God's image and likeness are found, not on an earthly throne, but on a cross.

There, Jesus is mocked by his title, 'King of the Jews'. He is simply an exposed, vulnerable, shamed human being. A body; no more. And yet, it is precisely here that Christians say: Behold the Lamb of God. Here is where love is fully manifest. In this image, we see what it is to be fully divine and truly human. And we, who are made in the image and likeness of God, no longer need to run after those who, through power or influence, promise a fake fulfilment.

As you can see, this church stands on the shoulders of those who rejected iconoclasm. The icons of Mary, Mother of God and St Nicholas are lit by candles offered in prayer. Above us, Christ hangs on the cross, and his mother and the beloved disciple stand next to him. Everywhere we look, there are figures, images. And that is because God, taking flesh, shares the very stuff of creation with us.

One of the great supporters of icons in the days of the controversy was John of Damascus. He says this:

[W]hen you think of God, who is a pure spirit, becoming man for your sake, then you can clothe him in a human form. When the invisible becomes visible to the eye, you may then draw his form. When he who is a pure spirit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of his own nature, existing as God, takes on the form of a servant and a body of flesh, then you may draw his likeness, and show it to anyone who is willing to contemplate it.

He adds: 'I honour all matter and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to me . . . Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing that God has made is.'

John of Damascus argued that those who rejected icons were failing to see what it meant for God to take flesh. By taking flesh, God honours all of matter. We rightly venerate Mary as Mother of God and we venerate the saints as icons of that outpouring love and grace. In a sense, we venerate every human being as a bearer of God's image. More, we venerate all of creation, all life and matter, as expressing in its depths the heart of its creator.

The image of the emperor on the coin is made to impress itself on us. It is a sign of value and power vested in might. An icon is different. It is not made to impress but to *invite*. An icon invites us into a relationship. It opens a space in which we are seen, known and heard. It calls us to see more deeply; to see the God who looks out through human eyes and touches us through created forms.

And all of this is rooted and grounded in Christ. As the letter to the Colossians states, in the end it is simply Jesus Christ who is *the* image – the icon – of the invisible God; Christ, who makes holy what is despised and lifts up the powerless.

We swim in a sea of images. We cannot avoid them. But we do need to interpret them, see them critically and deeply. We have only to look around our world to recognise the cycles of violence that images and representations create. The war over images and how to read them continues unabated.

There is no easy answer to this and it would be foolish of me to try and provide one. If nothing else, Jesus himself in this gospel refuses easy answers. He holds the question open: whose image do you see? What meaning do you give it?

We're not left to struggle with this question alone. God is with us in the depths of this world and its confusion. God is with us in the gestures of love that make us human. God is with us in the touch of creation, the earth that we should never simply exploit, because it is God's gift. The true image and icon of God is Christ, the one whose flesh bears the world in love. And that is the image we are called to be, even in the most difficult days faced with the most unanswerable dilemmas.

At this table, as well as being surrounded by icons and figures, we also behold the Lamb of God in the offering of love made in bread and wine. The eucharist too is the icon of God, the matter of God's love. Here, we are called to become what we celebrate, to become what we eat and drink, to be of one mind and body with Christ. When all emperors are dust, it is our humanity that is loved and raised by God to the heights. To give the final word to John of Damascus:

how can we not record in images the saving pains and miracles of Christ our Lord, so that when my child asks me, "What is this?" I may say, "That God the Word became man, and that for His sake not Israel alone passed through the Jordan, but the whole human race regained their original happiness. Through him human nature rose from the lowest depths of the earth higher than the skies, and in his Person sat down on the throne his Father had prepared for him.

Fr Steven Shakespeare