

Our image is reflected in shards of history.

Rev J Shannon

Exodus 33:12-23 Moses the mediator, Matthew 22:15-22 The question of paying taxes

St Francis Assisi wrote

I think God might be a little prejudice.
For once he asked me to join Him on a walk through this world...
And we gazed into every heart on this earth,
And I noticed He lingered a bit longer
Before any face that was weeping,
And before any eyes that were laughing,
And sometimes when we passed a soul in worship
God too would kneel down.
I have come to learn:
God adores his creation.

We have two stories today...

The first comes from the Old Testament...a collection of scripts, stories, poems, myths and oral history gathered by a shattered people, people scattered in a diaspora. A mixture of wisdom and law. A series of disputed history stories and commentary that invites us to deliberation.

And Mathew – the question of taxes from a book written by an oppressed people, for an oppressed people. Scattered believers in the early stages of gathering. Writers looking to capture an amazing story before it was lost in time. The Book to give these communities something to hold onto to, forever.

There is something about the stories that is so fundamental – they speak to us now. There are echoes of today in yesteryear's writing: Sometimes profound, sometimes unsettling and always amazing.

Back in the desert where we have been these last few weeks– the story so far,

While Moses was up the mountain sorting out the regs, the people below fashioned an idol so that they might see the face of a God – any God and feel that s/he was with them.

God told Moses. And then told him he would wipe the slate clean and be done with them. Moses does a brilliant job advocating on the people's behalf and God changes his mind.

Meanwhile – in the interim chapter we didn't read today, Moses comes down from the mountain, throws a hissy fit and smashes the tablets.

We pick up the story when Moses sets up in a tent, away from the camp, reserved for talking to the Lord. Anyone who wants a meeting with God can go to the 'phone box' tent. When Moses goes, a cloud comes down and guards the flap. This is a private conversation. The lines before our story today say, 'The Lord used to speak to Moses, face to face – **as one speaks to a friend**. The people stand and wait outside.

Moses is cheesed off in both directions. The people are unruly and the Lord has said he will spare them but basically abandon them. That's not good enough for Moses. He goes in to argue once again. You said you knew us by name, as we are. You said your presence would go with us. You promised you would show me the way! And if you are not going with us – don't bother.

Moses is no longer the refined advocate – he is the angry friend holding up the mirror ...and he remains a tireless advocate for his people. Once the reluctant leader, now totally invested.

And again, God relents and gives him everything *but* the face of God. Why is that? Because there is one thing that God cannot give...the one thing broken in the Garden of Eden – trust. It is intangible, fragile and precious.

You can't have faith – without trust – or trust without faith.

You can't have love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, self-control or kindness without trust. Sometimes it is simply listening to our gut or the little voice inside our head sometimes it is faith in a system and always a higher power.

Trust - Easily broken – almost impossible to repair.

The bigger story. Moses is a fine lawyer and good with an argument but ... God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,

God's ruling is to test our trust – forever.

Galatians 5:18-25 starts with 'if you are led by the spirit you are not subject to the law' and finishes with, 'if you live by the spirit let us be guided by the spirit.'

Echoes of the past reverberate today – eh? How we hear what we want to hear. 'Trust in me' is different from 'In God we Trust' – which by the way, didn't appear on American coins again until 1955. It was promoted by Eisenhower, Conservative businessmen and church leaders, including Billy Graham, to combat the social welfare policies and government expansion that began with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. ¹ The wide-ranging programs, designed to tackle the Great Depression, *really* bothered many conservatives. They objected to government intervention in free enterprise and market forces and in particular, Roosevelt's support for labour unions. It was part of the push to roll back all the programs like social security. And they figured God could take care of the poor. A recurrent theme.

So, to the question of taxes. Who pays taxes? And who doesn't? Will tax cuts get a government re-elected. Ours? Theirs? Pardon me, but I can't help it, it reminds me of a Caesar

The old one – not the current one.

Much of the Bible texts, and especially Paul's letters, were written during a period of intense Christian persecution. "The people were inundated with propaganda from the Empire. Declarations on the divinity of Caesar and his eternal reign appeared on coins and banners waved by occupying soldiers."² The laws threatened the way of life for Jews and Christians.

There was one Caesar, Domitian, who commissioned a choir to follow him around wherever he went and sing, "you are worthy, our Lord and God, to

¹ David Mislin, The conversation 9 Feb 2018, 'The Complex History of In God We Trust' <https://theconversation.com/the-complex-history-of-in-god-we-trust-91117#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIn%20God%20We%20Trust%E2%80%9D%20is%20a%20not%20a,an%20article%20originally%20published%20on%20Feb.%202%2C%202018.>

² Rachel Held Evens, *Inspired*, (2018) Nelson Books

receive honour and glory and power.” Fancy that! What kind of man would pay an audience to follow him around?

We’ve heard the tax story a million times and it is one of my favourites because it is so ‘clever’. It is easy to see that Jesus has avoided the trap by answering cryptically. It’s almost a magician’s trick distracting their gaze elsewhere. And while taxes were harsh, let’s not forget Romans also brought roads, schools, clean water and sanitation. So let’s give to the government what the government deserves, why not.

There is a bit of a sensational twist – perhaps a little too sophisticated for the Herodians and disciples to pick up at the time.

Now you and me know Jesus saying we are answering to a higher power but how do we know that?

Almost all the translations say that Jesus asked ‘whose Head?’ and ‘whose title?’ but the Greek word is not head it is EIKŌN) – image (Icon). The coin bears the image of Caesar – it is Caesar’s coin. Humans, on the other hand, bear the image of God. We can pay taxes but we do not belong to Caesar. This is a profound statement.

It is seditious – ‘the text operates subversively in every context where governments act as if citizens have no higher commitments than to the state.’³ When people are made by political circumstances to be less than human, (read Herd immunity) then this is a revolutionary statement. A reminder to the oppressed and the oppressor.

Both the Exodus and the Matthew stories place God *with* but separate from State.

Images are not God, they are reflections. And I mean that in all the lateral ways that word is used. It takes trust and faith to follow an unknown path for an unseen God ...

but we are reminded in the faces of each other, God is here, today.

In the mist, in the morning light, in the face of a child and my husband, I see your reflection and know we are blessed. Amen.

J Shannon

³ Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa et al, (1995) Texts for Preaching, Westminster John Know Press