

Wednesday in Trinity 18 Week, Year C

Luke 20.1-26

<Introduction>

Our Gospel reading today is like a three-act play.

First, Jesus is in the Temple establishing his authority. It's passing quietly from the old system to the new. Jesus is the Lord of the world; how much more is he the Lord of the Temple and all that is in it? The high priest and his henchmen might be making all the noise, blowing off a lot of hot air, but now he's challenged by the one who speaks quietly and with great force; the one who comes with real, royal authority. It has been about five hundred years in the making but now Israel has its true king at last. The old regime is being cast into the dust and the new one is here in Jesus.

Second, Jesus is the rightful heir to the 'family farm'. He, as Israel's true king, is summoning his subjects to obey him and to give God the honour and obedience that is his due. Israel had been charged to bear fruit for the kingdom until the king returned – and they've squandered it all. The rejection of the Son of God - the chief cornerstone - by the present regime is the signing of the death warrants for these self-appointed guardians of Israel's laws and heritage; the High Priest, the Sadducees, the lawyers and the scribes. Jesus will be vindicated, not them.

Third, realising that Jesus is on to them and is laying down a massive challenge to their status and power, they hatch their first plot: they try and catch him out. They are surrounded by enthusiastic listeners and the authorities are worried. So they send people to him who appear to be good, devout Jews, wrestling with a difficult question. If they were observing God's law, how could they possibly agree to pay taxes to a pagan overlord? *Especially* when the coins they had to use flouted Jewish law by using a picture of a human being (the Emperor or 'Caesar' himself) and by describing him with

blasphemous words. On the other hand, did they have a choice? Not to pay could court absolute disaster.

They pretended to be righteous, but what they had in mind was to hand Jesus over to the Roman governor. The trick question they had prepared looked as if it would do the job very well. It would either expose him as revolutionary opposed to the tribute, or it would show the crowds that he really wasn't the kind of leader they wanted after all by claiming that the kingdom wasn't physical at all – only spiritual. How, the audience thinks, can Jesus possibly get out of this one?

The heavy-handed introduction to the question, laying on the flattery with a trowel, serves to heighten the expectation that the questioners are leading Jesus right into their trap. Surely he won't now be able to avoid their cunning? Jesus is now, apparently, on the spot, about to be found out...when suddenly the roles are reversed. The entire scene is flipped onto its head. The accusers become the accused. The prosecution are suddenly in the dock. Jesus puts them on the defensive. He asks them to produce one of the coins in question. They pull one out... and land neck-deep in the muck. What are they, apparently devout, good Jews, doing with a hated coin and its blasphemous image and words ('son of god'), in their possession? The accusers are derailed. The trap is foiled. The hand-picked henchmen fail.

Jesus' double-edged command, finishes the conversation by not only answering the question, but throws down a huge challenge that cements the reversal of the scene. The accusers aren't just accused, they're convicted. On the one hand, there is a dark appropriateness about giving Caesar back his blasphemous coinage. Better to get rid of the stuff. The theme of 'giving the Romans back what they deserve' might itself have been heard as sign that it was right to believe that God's people should not be crushed under Roman rule. But, on the other hand, the challenge to Jerusalem, the Temple, its rulers and their hypocritical underlings, are all concentrated in the second half of the command: give *God* back what belongs to *him*. Here's the rub: Jesus' contemporaries have consistently failed to worship their true and loving God, and to live as his people before

the eyes of the world. The very Temple itself, the place that should have been filled with worship and prayer and holiness and sacrifice, has literally and metaphorically become a brigands' lair. If they just only put that right, then the question of Caesar would be quickly sorted out.

Underneath this is darker theme. Eventually the ruling class will find a way to bring Jesus down. They will hand over to Caesar not only the coin that bears his image, but the human being who truly bears God's image and who truly bears the title 'Son of God'. But, in the act, they are unwittingly offering to God the one stamped with the mark of self-giving love. The cross is taken up into both Caesar's purposes and God's: Caesar's favourite weapon, the cross, becomes God's chosen instrument of salvation.

We must ourselves, face the question of the accusers. We must get our priorities right. What does it mean today to give to God what belongs to him?