

Image

I didn't watch the presidential debate. I made it through about ten minutes of the vice-presidential debate. I knew the one would be a shouting match, and I didn't need any of that. I expected the second to be more civil, which it was, but I don't find it very inspiring when people talk past one another in order to recite prepared speeches. I'm not the sort of person who eagerly watches to how well candidates score points against each other or how good they make themselves look.

Politics has always been about image and trying to trap your opponent. That was just as true in Jesus' time as now. Those who say that religion and politics don't mix haven't been reading their Bible closely. Today's Gospel reading is very clearly political as well as religious. The Pharisees are furious that Jesus has been condemning their religious practices. The Herodians as collaborators with the Roman rulers see Jesus as threatening their political power. So these two strange bedfellows together try to trap Jesus into a charge of resisting Roman rule.

They start with flattery. Soften him up with soothing words of praise before going in for the kill. In Matthew's telling of the story, everything they say about Jesus has to be actually true even if it is said hypocritically. Jesus really is sincere and teaches the way of God in accordance with truth. He does show deference to no one. So will Jesus show deference to the emperor? What will he say about paying Roman taxes?

Jesus, being Jesus, sees right through their malice. He knows that if he says yes, it *is* lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he will discredit himself among the devout Jews who hate Roman rule. If he says no, then he is open to a charge of sedition that will land him in jail. Calling them hypocrites he asks to see the coin used for the tax. A Roman coin, the denarius, is readily at hand. Jesus asks whose image is on it. Why it's the emperor's, of course. Then Jesus gives that famous reply, so eloquent in the King James Version: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus has outmaneuvered his enemies and they slink away.

Image is at the center of this passage even though the word doesn't show up in our modern translation. To "regard people with partiality" is literally written as "look into the face of people." The word "hypocrite" comes right from the Greek, where it refers to actors and the masks they wore in Greek drama. They appeared to be something other than their true selves, which is exactly what a hypocrite is. Finally, the question about the coin is not whose *head* it is, but literally whose *image* is there.

True and false images. What we project and what is real. To a certain extent we always project an image that is not ourselves. Sometimes we do it to protect others, sometimes to protect ourselves, and sometimes because we may not know our true self. That's why I like the phrase, be who God knows you to be. In this life it's hard to find our true self, but we can always strive to be the person God knows us to be.

The irony of the Christian faith, true also for the Jewish faith, is that we are made in the image of a God who is imageless. No one can see God, and God is careful not to be seen, as the passage from Exodus reminds us. Even God's name is obscure. What we read as "the Lord" translates the Jewish euphemism for the divine name, which was too holy to pronounce – so holy, in fact, that even today no one quite is sure how to pronounce it or exactly what it means. Yet this is the God in whose image we are made!

We certainly know some of God's qualities through Jesus Christ. We also know how we are supposed to live. St. Paul had a favorite trio for describing the Christian life: faith, hope, and love. We heard them today in the letter to the church in Thessalonica. Paul spoke of their work of *faith* and labor of *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. When he exhorted them to be imitators of himself and of the Lord he was also referring indirectly to image – be who I am, in effect. Be who Jesus is.

That's a lifelong effort. I have plenty of work to do on my own image. I don't mean the usual sense of that phrase – what the world thinks of me – but rather the image of God that resides within me. The Bible teaches that *every* human being is made in the image of God. Yet there are so many ways to mar or bury that image. We forget that we are blessed, loving, faithful, and hopeful people.

I think that's why it is so difficult for me to watch political debates. There is so much posturing, so much that strikes me as false no matter who the candidate is. It seems to be the nature of the political beast. It takes very strong personal character to remain true to oneself in the heat of conflict, and few people in positions of power have that much character.

In the current political climate it's especially difficult to remember that every human being is made in the image of God – including those with whom we disagree or who wish us harm. But that's exactly what God calls us to do. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Will that change them? Perhaps. But it's guaranteed to change you, to become more and more the person whom God knows you to be. There's a challenge for you. Look for the image of God in others this election cycle, and you will find it in yourself. That's a promise.

[Pentecost 20: Exodus 33:12-23; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22.]