

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

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The Pharisees come to Jesus with a question. Not because they wish to learn. Not because they think that he has something to teach them. No, they come to Jesus with a question so that they might trap him with his own words. And, as we might expect, the question is a dangerous mixture of religion and politics. With taxation thrown in! Just the very things that still get people riled up! As you may recall, Jesus has been hitting them fairly hard of late. This week's story is set in the context of that first Holy Week; and Jesus has just ridden into the capital city of Jerusalem with the crowds calling him the Messiah. Hosanna in the highest, they cry. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! But, as you know, right after that Jesus heads off to the Temple, where he proceeds to upset all of the established order by driving out the merchants and the moneychangers, calling them all thieves in the process. And when the authorities challenge him and ask him what authority he has to do all of this, he turns the question around. He questions their authority, accusing them of being little better than disobedient children, worse than even the worst sinners of their day. And, if that weren't enough to get them really angry, he then goes on to tell a story about tenants and a vineyard; tenants who steal from their landlord and murder his son; who are hunted down and punished and cast out of the vineyard. And they realise after he's finished that story, that he's not really talking tenants in a vineyard; he's really talking about them. As disobedient, ungrateful, tenants in God's vineyard.

So, enough is enough. They've been embarrassed; they've been humiliated by this troublemaker; this rabble-rouser. And they're desperate to get revenge. So desperate, in fact, that they conspire with the very people they would never otherwise have trusted. They conspire with the political compromisers of their day – the Herodians – the ones who supported their Roman oppressors. Politics and anger and fear are a dangerous mix; as we know today. And when they come to Jesus they start building their trap with flattery. "We know that you are true," they say, lying through their teeth; "and that you teach the way of God truthfully." They're trying to butter him up; trying to get him to let down his guard before they go in for the kill. And even though their question is about taxation, it really has nothing to do with taxes or economics or fiscal policy. Not even about the law; because everyone knew what the law said. It has to do with politically volatile issues like freedom and patriotism and national pride and loyalty and treason. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Just that. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

And even if the only legal training you've ever had comes from the crime shows that you watch on TV, you have to be impressed by their question. If Jesus says yes, he risks offending and losing his followers and all of those for whom Roman taxation was a daily reminder that they were dominated and controlled by a foreign power; the hated occupiers and oppressors of their land. But if he says no, he risks being charged with insurrection and treason. The Herodians are there to act as witnesses. But, in truth, neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians really care how he answers. Either way, they think they've got him. But Jesus won't allow himself to be used or manipulated or co-opted by anyone: not by the Pharisees or the Herodians, or by us. He asks them whose image is on the tax

coin. "Caesar's," they answer. "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus refuses to play their game. If the coin belongs to Caesar because it's got Caesar's image; then we belong to God. Each has been marked with the image of its owner. And we have been coined in the image of God.

For us this week's Gospel isn't about taxes, and how much taxation is right. It's not about government power or control. It's not about freedom or patriotism or nationalism or loyalty or treason. Those are the kinds of questions that we see people yelling about every day. But for us this week's Gospel is about none of those things. It's about how we live as living, breathing, images of the compassionate, merciful God who has made us. Especially in a world as broken and divided as ours is.

St. Paul reminds us in this week's Epistle that we are citizens of a different country. That as much as we live right here, right now, subject to the rules and laws of this country, our behaviour is to be governed according to an entirely different set of principles. Principles that have no place for the yelling and screaming that we see every night on the news channels. Those futile conversations that have nothing to do with hearing and learning; nothing at all to do with engaging new ideas and new perspectives honestly and respectfully; conversations that are more like competitive battles in which each side fights to claim victory. Two sides talking past each other; just repeating verbatim their rehearsed talking points; seeking only to score points. Never seeking to listen or understand or learn.

If we are to be images of God, we have to do better. We have to do more than just sink to the level of social bitterness and division; we have to choose not to speak the self-serving language of resentment and dishonesty that we hear spoken every day. If we are to be images of the compassionate, merciful God who has made us, we have to be willing to live humbly. To recognise that just as we have been made in the image of God so has that person with whom we're struggling. And if we are to be images of the compassionate, merciful God who has made us, we have to be willing to be patient. To take the time necessary to hear their stories and to understand their fears. And if we are to be images of the compassionate, merciful God who has made us, we have to be willing to be merciful. To forgive; to refuse to be prisoners of what others have done to us.

This week's Old Testament Lesson from the Prophet Isaiah speaks hopefully not just of the coming of the Messiah; of that branch springing forth from the root of Jesse; the Saviour who will judge the poor and the meek with justice and equity; who will rise up to defend the weak against their oppressors. It also speaks of the re-ordering of the natural world: where the once powerful and violent will lie in peace with the vulnerable and weak: the wolf with the lamb; the leopard with the goat; the lion with the calf. It speaks of a world no longer ordered on the principles of power or control or manipulation or violence. It speaks of a world ordered on mutual cooperation and respect. And maybe that seems to you to be something of a fairy tale. Hopeless and unrealistic. But that's our true country; the country of which we have been made citizens. The country where we hope to live forever. And if it seems unrealistic it's only because humanity has never given it an honest chance. But maybe they'll be willing to try if they see it in us. If we're willing, by Grace, to show them a better way.