

## THE COIN WITH TWO HEADS *Cathedral, 22 October '17*

One of the privileges of ministry for me is meeting with those who are exploring the nature of God's call on their lives. It forms part of the Diocesan discernment process towards possible ordination. This year from one of the personal interviews I gleaned a useful perspective. The enquirer and I were talking about a theology of God and humanity. "There is always more to learn about who God is because the image of God in me meets the image of God in you," he said. He went on to explain that in this way he was always experiencing new facets of the image of God by being open to other people's realities and stories. I liked that idea, that we can choose to live with an intention of experiencing more of God through our encounters with other people in all their variety.

In today's story Jesus is at a stage in his ministry where there is increasing tension between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus' prophetic teaching. They are trying to catch him out by laying a trap for him – to pay taxes to Caesar or not? If he declares in favour of the tax, which is a Roman poll-tax he will be shunned by Jewish nationalists. If he declares against the tax, he will be seen to be stirring revolt against Roman law.

When Jesus asks to see the coin he also asks whose portrait or likeness it bears. The word is literally, though, *eikon*. We use it frequently with reference to the language of computing: an icon represents the person or program, or (literally) points to it. A good icon immediately conveys many possibilities, many functions.

Just so we see the icon or image of the Emperor and with it comes the whole Roman domination system and the taxation regime which was so hated. The inscription on the coin was regarded as blasphemous by many Jews because it ascribed divinity to the Emperor. Jesus subtly critiques both the occupying power and the claim to divinity in his answer. Nonetheless implicit in Jesus' answer is an obligation to pay your share of taxes. Taxation may still be controversial, but a fair distribution of the tax

burden is essential to shared well-being in a healthy society. Neo-liberalism is embraced almost religiously by some, but it has no clothes.

Jesus does a bit of creative on-the-hoof theology by introducing God into the question. *“Give to God what belongs to God”*.

What might it be that belongs to God? I believe what is in mind here is the flipside of the coin, a coin with two heads. What belongs to God is the image or icon of God.

Now an icon offers us possibilities and perspectives. It is invitational. It asks us *What do you see here?* (Show icon or icons here). An icon suggests that we go deeper in the quest for meaning.

Here is a story which I think of as having the qualities of an icon. As you listen, ask yourself *Where is the image of God in this story? How does this story invite us to give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and to give to God what is God's?*

Rita Nakashima Brock tells the story:

“An ordinary woman once lived in a small town in California. She was not famous, or powerful, or influential.... She was the kind of person we’d call a good neighbour. She was friendly, liked by her neighbours, and was good to her family. When the United States entered the Second World War, she supported the government- until California Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren signed an order requiring all U.S. Citizens of Japanese ancestry to be interned in relocation camps.

Many of this woman’s neighbours were Japanese Americans. She knew them and loved them as her friends. She went to Sacramento and lobbied the legislators. She wrote to the President to try to stop the camps and the government confiscation of Japanese property. She could not move the powerful and famous. She was a lone nobody ... the Disciples of Christ was the only official church body to protest the order to intern Japanese American citizens. So this lone woman... bought all the Japanese farms

and homes in her town for a dollar each and watched her friends be taken away. When the camps were closed, when the Japanese who survived had no homes left, when their lands were stolen by the government, this woman's neighbours were lucky. She gave her friends and neighbours back their homes and land so that they might live.”

To better understand the idea of the image (or icon) of God we need to turn to the book of Genesis. You will probably know that Genesis contains not one but two accounts of the creation. They are equally familiar, but different. The first is the 7 days of creation, and the second focuses on the human being created from the dust, and the formation of the woman. We are attending for the moment to the first story, in which God says *Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.*

What the image of God might actually be has long been a question. The best answer seems to be derived specifically from the this context of creativity. (By the way “Let us make...” does not imply the Royal “We” nor the much later doctrine of the Trinity – it is most probably a reference to the idea of a heavenly court, such as is narrated at the beginning of the book of Job.)

The context of divine creativity is shared with human beings. God makes room for what humans can also create. By speaking of the image of God as “both male and female” we are invited to understand the image of God in a very Hebrew way, which is to say it is not some abstract quality of humanity, such as reason or the ability to be self-reflective, rather it is the totality of being human across the spectrum of gender: body, mind, spirit.

So God is giving human beings the gift of potential, including stewardship and development of creation.

This yields some rich veins of theology to consider:

Being creative, in this light, is always an aspect of the image of God waiting to be discovered by us, rather than just a personal interest.

Whether you bake bread, tend a garden, enjoy a performance, sing a song, create a piece of art, or work for peace with justice, the invitation to discern the image of God is always present. I would liken it to those moments in some art form which gives you goosebumps: an exquisite harmony, the perfect grace of movement, the resolution of a storyline.

Another theological idea here is that maleness and femaleness are both essential to fully express the image of God. Any oppression or exploitation of women (as is in the news at present) sullies the image of God, but all efforts at true equality become an icon of God.

Finally, Terence Freitheim reminds us that God's action in making room for human creativity carries serious risk, as with all freedoms:

*God is not powerful and creatures powerless, as if the Godness of God could be bought at the expense of creaturely diminishment. In the very act of creating, God gives to others a certain independence and freedom. God moves over, as it were, and makes room for others. Creation involves an ordered freedom, a degree of openness and unpredictability wherein God leaves room for genuine decisions on the part of human beings as they exercise their God-given power. ... Human beings have been given freedom enough to destroy themselves, though God does not will such destruction. God does not have a final and solitary will in place from the beginning.*

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”: Play your part in the social order, but do not sell yourself out to a system of domination, because you belong to God.

“Give to God what belongs to God”. You are actually a part of the image of God, perceive it in the reality and creativity of others, perceive it in yourself!

- Ian Render (Dean)