

### “Heads or Tails”

Back in 1979 “Monty Python’s Life of Brian” hit the theaters. It was a great sensation with various Christian sects protesting the movie. It was called heretical and blasphemous. As is typical with these sorts of protests those that made the most noise had to confess that they had not seen the movie. Somehow they just knew it was a diatribe against Christianity. I recall going to see the movie and crossing a picket line to do so. It felt a little daring and a little silly at the same time. The movie is a hilarious satire, and has been called one of the greatest of British comedies.

One of the funniest shticks in the movie is when three insurrectionists are trying to convince a small crowd that they needed to rise up against the Roman oppressors. The leader of the insurrectionists asks the rhetorical question, “After all what have the Romans ever done for us?” After a short silence as the leader is looking very satisfied with himself someone in the crowd quietly says, “The aqueducts.” The leader responds, “yeah, yeah they did give us the aqueducts.” Then another person chimes in, “And the sanitation.” The leader who is named Reg agrees that “those are two things they Romans have done.” Unfortunately for Reg it goes downhill from there, as other members of the group point out that the Romans have given them roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, and public safety. Reg then says, well besides all of that what have the Romans ever done for us?

In addition to those benefits the Pax Romana also brought political and social oppression, lack of freedom, and taxes. One way the Romans kept their conquered peoples in line was onerous taxation. Taxation may have helped pay for those many improvements, but more importantly they kept the populace poor. The average person was always trying to make enough money to feed themselves and pay their taxes. The Romans did not give a pass on the taxes.

Thus during the week prior to Passover when the Pharisees and Herodians are plotting to arrest Jesus they decide to challenge him with what they think is a gotcha question about taxes. “The Pharisees saw the tribute tax as a heretical and antinationalist capitulation to a pagan emperor, while the Herodians viewed refusing to pay the tax as sedition.”<sup>1</sup>

They start out by flattering Jesus, saying “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.” I am sure they thought that this would ingratiate them to Jesus and he would let his guard down. It is clear that he does not. Then they spring the question on him that they think has no good answer. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

You can almost see them wringing their hands in glee, licking their lips, and whispering to each other that they have trapped him. They are certain that they have put him in a predicament that he cannot get out of without

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, “What Belongs to God” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2787-what-belongs-to-god>

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur  
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The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
Holy Eucharist 8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.  
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impeaching himself. No matter which way he answers he will be in trouble with one group and can be arrested. Finally, they can get this troublesome man out of their hair and things will settle down in Jerusalem.

However, Jesus is not so easily tricked or entrapped. Indeed, he asks rhetorically, “Why are you putting me to the test you hypocrites?” At that point they must have been reassured that they had him. Then he asks for a coin and asks whose title and head are on the coin. When they respond that it is the emperor’s, he says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” He has not fallen into their trap. They have to go off and find another way to deal with this popular rabbi.

In the Sunday School classes of my youth that might be the end of it. We would marvel at how clever Jesus is and perhaps chalk this up as another miracle of the Son of God. But there is more to this story than that.

It is obvious that the coin belongs to the emperor, his face is on it. But what exactly belongs to God. Jesus did not say. He just said, “Give ... to God the things that are God’s.” What do you suppose Jesus meant by that? What belongs to God do you think? Is it our soul? Is it our life? Is it all that we have in this life? Could it be even more than that? What if as a clue to the answer I were to quote from the Book of Genesis, “In the beginning God ...” If God created everything could everything belong to God? Not just our souls, lives, families, possessions, and not only all that is ours but even the soul, life, and possessions of the emperor too. The emperor may think that he is his own man and that he rules because he was chosen by fate or family or politics, but he is still a creature of God and therefore owes God tribute as much as anyone. A coin may bear the image of a man or woman. But each man and woman bears the image and likeness of God.

Jesus is teaching us that we are part of something larger and more profound than our personal lives. We may owe taxes and allegiance to our nation, but our ultimate allegiance is to God. We are to give our entire selves to God, because God gave us life and the opportunity to choose where our allegiance rests. If we give ourselves to profit, money, political party, power, or any other earthly thing we are making a fool’s choice. There is only one ultimate and eternal, only one who deserves our full allegiance. That is God.