Pull out a coin. Whose image is on it.

So we don’t see that as a problem

At its simplest, on first reading we see the Pharisees falling into their own trap. They go away with their collective tails between their legs.

But this story, of course, has a history behind it. I guess it’s the job of the person on the talk to give the background and make the story come alive for its time and for us and how we live now.

The setting is that things are already tense in a number of ways. Any possible of Jesus’ answers can only make things worse – for him at least so the Pharisees believed. You bowed to the Roman rule or not. You were complicit or you were treasonous

In the previous chapter, 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem like a king with crowds welcoming their saviour. He has driven out the money lenders in the temple, upsetting again the same religious authorities about their economic structure.

Next thing Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants who eventually kill the owner’s son. Pointed directly at the managers of ‘the nation. Bound to poke at the hornets’ nest.

This is the stage when the religious leaders, the Pharisees and the Herodians, the civil leaders appointed by Caesar (Caesar meaning King or another word is Czar in Russian.) come to Jesus with their tricky question. Did you want to cooperate with the oppressors or you could say ‘no’ and be branded as a revolutionary and a trouble maker.

A lot of buttering up first to try to put Jesus off his guard and appeal to his vanity. That doesn’t work. They are trying to use the qualities that are outstanding in Jesus to lure him. Humility, a great teacher, impartiality and love.

It reminds me of Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens in his 1850 novel, David Copperfield. – ingratiating himself with his employer but full of malice and betraying trust.

Back to the story’s recent history. The Romans asked for their taxes to be paid in silver coins called denarii

**Picture Denarius**

Made in Gaul, now France, on one side was the image of Tiberius Caesar with the words “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, himself holy”. and on the other a picture symbolising the Pax Romini (Roman Peace)

What blasphemy. A person claiming divinity. Even having an image was blasphemy. We know the commandment about graven images.

We read in Ex 33 that God was so holy that no one could look at His face.

There had even been a Jewish uprising when thousands of Jews had died rather than let a foreign icon pollute Jerusalem. This coin was still a sore point.

The authorities who asked the question were still using these coins but changed to their own coins in the temple. Temple taxes were paid in these temple coins. It was both of these coins that had, just days before, been on the moneychangers’ tables that were overturned by Jesus. Further enraging the authorities and threatening their livelihood and respect.

How could Jesus escape the binary question. Yes or No. Instead he puts them on the spot. ‘Whose image is this?” Of course, they knew. They were the ones who had sold out to the Romans.

The blasphemous Roman coin should go back to where it came from. “” Give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” Paul also encouraged the Thessalonians to turn from idols and worship the true and living God. There is a match here.

Jesus again asserts that his authority comes from God. He repeats this right up to the interview with Pilate.

**Picture single coin**

Let’s come to grips with the implications for us. This passage has been taken to divide the world up into two parts – spiritual and worldly. Don’t mix the two. But what happens when the state contradicts the morality that God proclaims.

Romans 13: 1-3 *Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.  Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.  For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.*

Many have confronted the State on civil rights, war, genocide, apartheid. The church and governments have used the Romans 13 passage and Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees and the Herodians as justification to persecute and oppress and demand political obedience.

The crux of the matter is to give to ‘God what belongs to God.’ Paul and Jesus are consistent in their behaviour to authority. Challenge what is wrong but submit to God first.

What does submitting to God look like? What idols are we turning away from? What image are we to reflect? It’s God’s image, the image that we were made in.

Will our lives reflect subservience to the State, social media, the mass media, expectations that consumerism and wealth will bring a revolution of hope. We know that these things have not brought happiness. We’re less happy than our grandparents (on average) despite being four times wealthier.

**Picture – In God We Trust**

Our allegiance is to God, to radical kingdom values that do bring hope. Jesus pointed out that all things are under God, whether they are political, economic or not.

This is not a conversation about taxes; it’s about belonging and citizenry. Whose will do you pray will be done–that of the Holy One or the emperor? Do you belong to the kingdom of God or to the empire? Is your allegiance to the nation where you reside or the Creator of all? In the words of Joshua, “Choose this day whom you will serve.” (Joshua 24:15) The answer cannot be both. The duality of following The Way means residing in the empire while maintaining citizenry (and ultimate allegiance) to the kingdom.

Jesus again shows a third way. He is neither complicit with the corrupt power nor violently revolutionary.

People have used the passage to ask that Christians do not mix their religion with politics but today's big issues are inseparably bound up with politics and for people of faith it is important to consider all aspects. Indeed, as people of faith we are called to look beyond our own advantage or our own region or nation's advantage to the question: what is good for all? These days we cannot ignore the major issues which we face in climate change: our future and the future of generations to come is at stake. How can that not be spiritual and political? Deeds of terror which have set the agenda of recent years and even days need to be set into a broader perspective. Why is world poverty less serious than headline catching terrorist attacks?

On the matter of perspective 3,000 people were killed in the 9/11 attacks on USA’s heartland. But 6,000 children a day die quietly, unnoticed, from dirty water. Another perspective- 2 days’ worth of arms spending globally would provide clean water and sanitation to the rest of the world currently without them.

There is a wider and deeper mourning which, while decrying acts of terror, also senses the less articulate pain which people suffer through poverty and the massive structural injustices of our world. We need to hold open the God-space for people so that they can make the journey through immediate pain, without falling to the slogans which reduce the issues to terror alone or to 'other religions'. Only so can we help stop the cycle of violence. Flip the coin: God's actually on both sides!