Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 18th October 2026, Pentecost 21

Readings: **Exodus 33:12-23** **Psalm 99**
1Thessalonians 1:1-10 **Matthew 22:15-33**

When the Nicene Creed was crafted in the early fourth century, we know there was vigorous discussion about what words to use. It was hoped that it would be a statement of faith which would provide clarity and bring unity for those who believed in Christ, at a time when there was much conflict. The writers could not have known that this statement would still be used seventeen hundred years later – but, it is in our prayer books, and we say it together when we worship most Sundays.

The Nicene Creed has helped to form thinking about Christ through the centuries, but I think it unhelpfully strips Jesus of human identity. I say 'unhelpfully' because having some sense of who he was and what context he lived in, is enormously helpful when seeking to understand and interpret the Gospels.

The current translation of the Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus, *'…came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human.'* It does not say that Jesus was born into a Jewish community and grew to be a Jewish man living in a little country that had been invaded and colonised by the Roman Empire!

When we remember that Jesus was born in Palestine two thousand years ago, we can more easily imagine the agricultural context of vineyards and grain growing; sheep and goats. And, when we bear in mind that Jesus was Jewish, we can better understand the context of synagogue and Temple; Pharisees and Sadducees; religious law… and the Jewish community's longing for a future leader called Messiah. And, when we remember that Jesus lived in an occupied territory, we might better appreciate the resentment that existed towards the Roman administration and the taxes they demanded.

Roman soldiers were garrisoned throughout Palestine, and the Roman administration used Jewish men to collect taxes. Not surprisingly these men were regarded as collaborators by many in the Jewish community and were deeply resented. So, when Luke's Gospel describes Jesus inviting himself for a meal at the home of a tax collector called Zachaeus it's easy to imagine why the crowd grumbled. Why would Jesus waste time with that collaborator? And, why did he offer friendship to someone who had sold his soul, at least metaphorically, to an oppressor?

The encounter described in today's Gospel is not between Jesus and a tax-collector, but it does draw from the resented experience of being taxed by the Roman authorities. Jesus was challenged by two powerful groups in Jewish society who had formed an unlikely coalition: the Pharisees, and the Herodians. I say 'unlikely' because the Pharisees took seriously their understanding of Jewish religious law, while the Herodians did not. Conversely, the Herodians supported Roman rule and benefited from it, while the Pharisees hoped for Roman rule to come to an end.

The common interest for each of these groups was in reducing the credibility of Jesus because his increasing popularity threatened the religious authority of the Pharisees, and the political authority of the Herodians.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel tells us that they asked Jesus this loaded question, *'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?'*

If Jesus had said it was lawful the Pharisees would claim his credibility as a religious teacher was compromised because the image of the 'divine emperor' on each coin was a form of idolatry. But, if instead he said it was not lawful then the Herodians, loyal to the Roman administration, could charge him with sedition. So, for this unlikely coalition it may have seemed like a win-win situation!

However, Jesus offered a third, unanticipated, response. He asked them to look at a coin and tell him whose image was on it and in reply they had to say that it was the emperor. Jesus continued, *'then give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God.'*

The genius and challenge of this response has resonated through the centuries, because a fundamental belief from the first creation story in Genesis is that all human beings are made in the image of God. Remember it says, *"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them…" (*Genesis 1:27).

So, the inference is that if the image on a coin indicates that it belongs to political leadership and government, then each human face indicates a belonging to God. Jewish people believed then that they were the chosen people of God, and that if they kept their religious laws God's favour was only for them. The inference that all of humanity is made in God's image suggests that all of humanity belongs to God.

Perhaps we sometimes think like those ancient Jewish people: that we are chosen, and that God's love and favour is only for us? We might think that God can only love those who

speak like us, look like us, have the same values, and go to the same church? But, the Genesis reference suggests that we are all made in the image of God and are God's children. If we genuinely believed this…. what implications are there for the way we think about, and relate with, those we consider different?

Who are the people in our community, or our society, that we struggle to value, or regard as rubbish? Are they the aboriginal people of our community, or those who have come to Australia as refugees? In a faith context are they 'the Muslims', or 'the Evangelicals'? And politically, are they the MAGA supporters of Donald Trump, or are they 'The Greenies'?

I think we each have conscious or unconscious bias for and against some people and groups and forget that those we look down upon, or loathe, are made in God's image… and, like us, are God's children.

Remember the command to love our neighbour is not qualified by suggesting that we love them if we like them or they think like us! The command is to love our neighbour whoever they are, and it is a deeply challenging way of being in the world.

As write this I offer a qualifying note. The command to love our neighbour should not be interpreted as a command to remain in a relationship within which there is ongoing abuse, or violence. Within Australia there is, quite tragically, a very high rate of domestic and family violence largely perpetrated by men against women. I do not think for one moment that God would desire a person to stay in a relationship until they are beaten to death. In such circumstances I think God would desire the abused person to be safe and for 'love' to be offered from a very safe distance.

We are not left alone in our pilgrimage of life and faith for God's Spirit is available to us each day, and is present even in each breath. Perhaps we can look within ourselves this week and recognise someone or some group that we have written off as thoroughly as the Jewish community wrote off the tax collectors. With that insight we might then ask God's Spirit to help us understand them in a new way… and even pray for them God's blessing.

Let's try that now as we close in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We offer our lives to you and ask for your blessing on the people we struggle with and look down upon. We ask in the name of the one who called you 'Abba', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.