

# God and the Emperor

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Readings: Matthew 22:15-22

## I.

Five hundred years ago next week, they say, the monk and scholar Martin Luther started the protestant reformation. He did it, according to the story, by nailing his ninety-five theses on a church door in Germany, to start a debate over the abuse of power by the established church, and some points of doctrine as basic as what it takes—and what it doesn't, to be saved. Much to Luther's surprise, the flame caught fire—and engulfed Europe. Truthfully, there had been movements for change in the church before that! It was already lit. But Luther sure got it going. In honor of the anniversary, I will put on my black robe next week, we will sing some mighty old hymns, and we will talk reformation.

But this morning, we need to talk about God's revolution.

This morning's gospel reading comes from a much earlier time, when the Roman Empire was at its peak, almost two thousand years ago. It remembers the time the rabbi, Jesus, who lived in a tumultuous corner of that empire, was approached by some theological students and some folks from the local puppet ruler, Herod. They were sent to ensnare him, each group with its own dubious agenda. Their question was this: Is it lawful for us as Jews to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?

It was an impossible question, for if Jesus answered one way the spies from the government would get him and if he answered the other, the religious purifiers would reject him utterly.

Jesus, ever the teacher, asked them for a coin. "Whose face and inscription is printed on this?" It was a Roman coin, a denarius, and the head was Caesar's, as was the name on it. But the very problem that had been posed to Jesus was stamped on that coin. The inscriptions on those coins typically named Caesar either a god or the son of a god! And the face itself was a "graven image". So, the *coin*

might be due to Caesar on Tax Day. But no good Jew then, nor Christian, a generation later, believed that the *reverence* did. Caesar wasn't divine. And to call him that would be idolatry. *That* word, that honor, that inscription, was due to God alone. NOT the emperor. Give back the emperor what is the emperor's to take. But give God what is due to God.

## II

Jesus' impossible answer to the impossible question has inspired more sermons than we can count, among them a few good ones. But since all the world is for a moment talking about Martin Luther, here's as good a place to start as any. Here are two short snippets from Luther's sermon on Matthew 22, from 1521. Old as they are, I find the words timely and refreshing. In 2017, when many Christian leaders in America, who pride themselves on the purity of their doctrine and faithfulness to the literal word of God, are calling us to worship the emperor as God's handpicked servant, as though some new unlikely messiah, these are needed words. Hear the bold sinner, Martin Luther.

*From Martin Luther (Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity, Matthew 22:15-22  
A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil of 1521.  
<http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity23/LutherGospel.html>)*

11. Therefore we should not be afraid of powers. But we should fear our prosperity and good days which cause us more harm than our anguish and persecution; and we should not be afraid in the face of the wisdom and the shrewdness of the world, for they can do us no harm. Yes, the more the wisdom of the world opposes the truth, the purer and clearer does the truth become....

18. Therefore we are to put all our trust only in the Lord, and say: O Lord, thou art my life, my soul and body, my goods and possessions, and all that is mine. Do thou direct and ordain it all according to thy divine will. In thee do I trust, in thee do I believe.

Even Martin Luther, well known for his cozy relationship with some pretty iffy princes, was clear in his better moments: When push comes to shove, and when even the best of emperors calls us to forsake the path of Jesus, the path of a God of love and forgiveness, compassion and justice, then our choice is not much of a choice. God comes first. It has got to be God all the way. We may have to suffer under the emperor, we may be forced to pay the emperor, but we do not, we will not, we cannot worship the emperor. Not a democrat emperor, not a republican

emperor, not a Roman emperor nor an American emperor. No matter how pretty they dress; how they orate or how they fume; how they may disturb or indeed how they inspire us.

### III

This past few days I have been listening to lectures by famous South African church leader and theologian Alan Boesak, in New Haven Connecticut. In the early 1980's it was Boesak who pushed for the reformed churches of the world to declare apartheid a sin and the theological justifications for systemic racism a heresy. Over the past few days he reminded the prosperous-looking crowd of scholars and preachers that ours is a God of liberation; the God, as he said, not of empire, but of the birthing stool and the riverbank and the seashore. He was straightforward in saying that we need to choose which version of God we are going to believe in: the God of conquest whom men beginning with Moses have so often appealed to, or the God of liberation who has strengthened those who suffer under the pharaohs and Caesars of every age and who gives them the wisdom from the ground up to resist unjust and bloody power.

On our coins here in the US of A it says, "In God we trust." But Alan Boesak was asking us a difficult question. In effect he was asking: What kind of God do we trust in? If we trust not in the god of guns and greed but in the God of Miriam, in the God of Mary the mother of Jesus, then we trust in a God who will overturn unjust structures of power, and will bring the mighty low, will raise up those of low degree, will turn the empire upside down, will birth a new creation amid the ashes of the old.

At the end of every lecture we clapped hard and rose to applaud the speaker. But I couldn't help but think that the real measure of whether we were listening won't be in clapping and handshakes. It will be in often invisible deeds that show we get it about what's right for those who suffer most, that we stand with and work together with the women and men and children who are systematically put down to advance the causes of a few who own almost everything. For those few owners cannot own our souls.

### IV

I want to talk for a moment in closing about who we are, and why I love you so much. In the past three and a half years I've gotten to know a church with a deep concern for peace, and justice, but the form this takes isn't so much in lots of

words. I've noticed in the fleeting years I have been here that when something doesn't seem right or fair or just, you have the capacity to get pretty exercised about it. Some years ago, it seems, we made a choice to go the way of siding with the people on the edges, or maybe God made it for us, with some help from some of God's more unlikely saints.

Many of the people who taught us to get cranky at injustice were strong women, women who let you know each in a very different way just who God really is, that God is one who cares deeply, and can't abide to see people hurt. Would you name me some of the women especially who have been a part of that learning for us here? First hint I can think of two very different very passionate black women both of whom had some work they did at city hall...one in an office—I hear another did some evangelizing in the halls? Ok, now call out some other names, women who have taught us who God is...

*(Congregation members call out names including Malinda Myers and Lilly Chamberlain)*

In the process of these years going by, we have also learned a little bit about the downside of power when it is ruthlessly applied. Because we have seen our friends messed over or denied access to the things they need to live decently—a decent education or access to jobs or good medical care. Maybe it has been you individually who struggled, up against what my friend Eleazar from Chiapas described as a faceless monster.

It is not from signs and wonders but in these little revelations from friends, these places of struggle and uncertainty, we learn who God really is but also what the emperor really is. We learn what love really is, what grace really is, in the places where friends hang together in the face of injustice and want. We learn who God really is, not from the voices from on high but from the hand extended in hidden corners, and mercy shared on an unexpected Tuesday.

In these moments of prayer as well, these songs we sing, we find God. Not far off in heaven, and most assuredly not where the foolish prophets say, who tell us God has taken up residence personally down in Washington DC.

Let us give God what belongs to God: our hearts for love for our neighbors, our courage for steadfast resistance to the structures of evil, our minds to distinguish clearly compassion from hate, our wills to pour out our lives in thanksgiving and in joy, as our savior taught us.

And let us give the emperor his due: a healthy dose of doubt, and a readiness to be respectfully truthful in the face of power, and to resist the abuse of power with all we have where conscience and love alike compel us so to do.