29th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Whose image is this?

1. This is a homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

2. The gospel for this Sunday comes from the gospel of St Matthew, Chapter 22, verses 15-21.

3. To download the text of this homily as a PDF file, go to sundayhomilies.au

4. Since Jesus entered Jerusalem, the tension has been steadily mounting. Riding into the city on a donkey, he was acclaimed by the crowds as the long-awaited Son of David.

5. He then went directly to the Temple precincts, drove out the money changers and those selling animals, and declared that God's house had become "a den of robbers." That dramatic prophetic action ensured that the chief priests could no longer dismiss Jesus as a minor nuisance. They were now forced to deal with him.

6. In *The Jewish War*, the Jewish historian Josephus describes the volatile atmosphere that prevailed during the great festivals, especially Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims from across the Jewish world. It was during these festivals, he notes, that outbreaks of sedition were most likely.

7. With tens of thousands of pilgrims present, the Temple authorities would have been deeply alarmed by the disturbance Jesus had caused. The Roman garrison occupied the Antonia Fortress, which overlooked the Temple precincts, allowing soldiers to monitor any sign of unrest.

8. On the Tuesday of what we now call Holy Week, Jesus has returned to the Temple. It has become a day of sustained confrontation. The chief priests and elders have already challenged his authority: "By what authority are you doing these things?" Rather than answering their challenge directly, Jesus responds with a series of three parables.

9. The first, the Parable of the Father and his Two Sons, exposes the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. They are like the son who says, "Yes," to his father but does not do his will.

10. That was followed by the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, in which the chief priests and the Pharisees realised that Jesus was speaking about them.

11. Last Sunday's Gospel, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, sharpened that critique still further.

12. Jesus' opponents have now concluded that direct confrontation is getting them nowhere. Unable to defeat him in open debate or turn the crowds against him, they adopt a different strategy. They will attempt to trap him with carefully constructed questions, hoping to force him into an answer that will either discredit him before the people or provide grounds for his arrest. Today's Gospel begins a series of carefully orchestrated attempts to trap Jesus.

13. By this stage, the opposition to Jesus has become increasingly organised. What began as concern among the chief priests over his actions in the Temple had broadened into a coalition of influential groups, each with its own reasons for wanting him silenced. The chief priests feared for the stability of the Temple and the delicate political balance they maintained with Rome. The elders regarded him as a threat to the established order.

14. Today's Gospel introduces an unlikely alliance as the Pharisees and the Herodians join forces in an attempt to trap Jesus with a carefully constructed question. They had very different outlooks and interests, yet they were united by a common objective: to find a way of discrediting Jesus or handing him over to the Roman authorities. Before we examine their question, it is worth asking: who exactly were the Pharisees? We shall come to the Herodians shortly.

15. The Pharisees remain one of the most familiar yet one of the most misunderstood groups in the New Testament. The Greek name Φαρισαῖοι (Pharisaioi) almost certainly derives from the Hebrew פְּרוּשִׁים (perushim), meaning "the separated ones" or “separatists."

16. Exactly what this separation meant has long been debated. The Jewish scholar Rabbi Shaye Cohen points out that we cannot say with certainty precisely what the Pharisees separated themselves from. Was it from Gentiles? From sources of ritual impurity? Or from Jews whom they regarded as lax in observing the Law? Quite possibly, he suggests, it was all three.

17. Cohen makes another intriguing observation: "It is likely that the term was first used by the group's opponents in order to denigrate it ('Separatists!' they cried) and that it never became part of the group's self-definition. At least it never so appears in the Mishnah or in the bulk of rabbinic tradition." Whatever the precise origin of the name, the Pharisees' aim was not isolation but holiness: to live Israel's covenant life with the highest possible degree of faithfulness.

18. Ironically, although the Pharisees loom large in the Gospels, we possess no writings that can confidently be identified as Pharisaic. Unlike the Essene community at Qumran, which left behind the vast collection of manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pharisees themselves left us no comparable body of literature. The one partial exception is Paul, whose letters survive and who continued to describe himself as a Pharisee even after his conversion, recognising that his belief in the resurrection had been nurtured within that tradition. Everything else we know about the Pharisees comes from writers outside the movement itself.

19. The New Testament refers to the Pharisees ninety-nine times, making them by far the Jewish group most frequently encountered in the Gospels. Yet these references are shaped by the evangelists' theological purposes and by the growing tensions between the early Church and certain Jewish leaders in the decades after Jesus' death.

20. Outside the New Testament, our most important first-century witness is Flavius Josephus. Surprisingly, however, Josephus refers to the Pharisees fewer than twenty times across his extensive writings. He presents them as one of the three principal schools of Jewish thought, alongside the Sadducees and the Essenes, and describes them as enjoying considerable influence among the ordinary people. His comments, though valuable, are brief and written for a Greco-Roman audience, leaving many questions unanswered.

21. Much later evidence comes from the Mishnah, compiled around AD 200, and the Talmud, completed over subsequent centuries. These rabbinic writings almost certainly preserve traditions that originated among Pharisaic teachers, and many scholars regard rabbinic Judaism as the spiritual heir of the Pharisaic movement after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.

22. Nevertheless, caution is required. The Mishnah and Talmud were written generations after Jesus and reflect a later stage in Jewish history. They cannot simply be read back into the first century without careful historical judgment.

23. The Pharisees were fundamentally a lay movement rather than a priestly one. Unlike the Sadducees, whose influence was centred on the Temple and the priesthood, the Pharisees consisted largely of educated laymen, scribes and teachers of the Law who sought to extend to ordinary Israelites the standards of holiness traditionally associated with the priesthood.

24. They believed that faithful obedience to God was not confined to the Temple or its sacrifices but should permeate every aspect of life. This explains their intense interest in matters such as purity laws, Sabbath observance, tithing and the careful interpretation of Scripture.

25. As far as we can reconstruct their beliefs, the Pharisees accepted the written Torah but were also loyal to the ancestral tradition that interpreted and applied the Law to new situations, a tradition that later came to be known as the Oral Torah. Many of their beliefs stood much closer to the teaching of Jesus and the early Church than did those of the Sadducees. The New Testament itself reflects this complexity.

26. Although the Pharisees are frequently portrayed as opponents of Jesus, not all Pharisees opposed him. Nicodemus defended Jesus before his fellow leaders and later assisted in his burial. Gamaliel urged restraint towards the apostles.

27. The frequent conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees should not obscure how much they shared in common. Both worshipped the God of Israel, revered the Scriptures, and lived within the covenant God had made with his people. Yet one profound difference separated them. The Pharisees interpreted the Law of Moses. Jesus, however, claimed the authority to declare its definitive meaning.

28. The Herodians are much more obscure. They are mentioned only a handful of times in the New Testament, and no ancient writer tells us very much about them.

29. Most scholars believe they were not a religious sect but a political group that supported the Herodian dynasty, the family of Herod the Great and his successors, who ruled Palestine under Roman authority.

30. Their primary concern was the preservation of the existing political order. They therefore had every reason to view Jesus, with his growing popularity among the crowds and his provocative actions in the Temple, as a potential threat to public stability.

31. The alliance between the Pharisees and the Herodians was highly unusual. The Pharisees were primarily concerned with the faithful observance of the Jewish Law, whereas the Herodians were closely associated with a royal dynasty whose power ultimately depended upon Rome.

32. Their priorities were very different, and under ordinary circumstances they would have had little reason to cooperate. Yet their shared opposition to Jesus proved stronger than their differences. As the old saying goes, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Together they devised a question that they hoped would leave Jesus with no safe answer.

33. So, the disciples of the Pharisees, accompanied by some Herodians, approach Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Caesar.

34. "Teacher, we know that you are truthful, and that you teach the way of God truthfully. You are not influenced by anyone, because you do not judge by appearances. Tell us, then, what is your opinion? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

35. Taxation was a volatile and deeply divisive issue. Only a generation earlier, in AD 6, the Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Judas the Galilean had led a revolt over precisely this question. Judas proclaimed that God alone was Israel's true ruler and that faithful Jews should acknowledge no earthly master. In practice, that meant refusing to pay tribute to Rome.

36. Rome crushed the revolt mercilessly. Revolutionaries were crucified as a warning to others, their crosses lining the roads of Galilee. The message could not have been clearer: taxation was compulsory, not optional.

37. Judea had become subject to Rome when the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 BC. At first, however, Rome ruled indirectly through local client kings, especially Herod the Great and, after him, his son Archelaus. That arrangement came to an abrupt end in AD 6 when Rome deposed Archelaus, annexed Judea as a Roman province, appointed its own governor, and imposed a direct annual poll tax on the Jewish people. It was this tax that lay behind the question put to Jesus.

38. Roman taxation was burdensome not only because of the financial cost. It also served as a constant and offensive reminder that God's people lived under the direct rule of a pagan empire.

39. Here you can see the coin used to pay the poll tax, the denarius. This coin dates from the reign of Tiberius, the emperor during the public ministry of Jesus. On one side it bears the emperor's image together with the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, the August One." On the reverse appears the title *Pontifex Maximus*—"High Priest."

40. Do we pay the tax or not? It was a carefully laid trap.

41. If Jesus answered, "No," he could be denounced to the Roman authorities as a revolutionary who encouraged people to withhold tribute from Caesar. Such a charge could easily lead to his arrest.

42. If, on the other hand, he answered, "Yes," his opponents could portray him as a collaborator with Rome. Given the deep resentment many Jews felt towards Roman occupation and taxation, such an answer would almost certainly cost him the support of the crowds. Whichever way Jesus answered, the Pharisees and the Herodians were sure they had trapped him. Either the Romans would remove him, or the crowds would abandon him.

43. Jesus, however, refuses to answer on their terms. "Show me the coin used for paying the tax."

44. They immediately hand him a denarius. Notice that Jesus does not produce the coin; his opponents do. Standing in the Temple precincts, they hand Jesus a coin which, as we've seen, bears the emperor's image and proclaims him to be the son of a god.

45. This, incidentally, explains why money changers were needed in the Temple precincts. A coin that proclaimed the divinity of a pagan emperor was deeply offensive to Jewish religious sensibilities.

46. Holding up the coin, Jesus asks, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" There is only one possible answer.

47. "Caesar's."

48. Jesus then delivers one of the most famous sayings in the New Testament:

49. "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God."

50. Many people today understand these words as teaching the separation of Church and State.

51. That is almost certainly not what Jesus meant. Such a distinction would have made little sense in the ancient world, where religion and public life were inseparable.

52. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that one of the defining characteristics of the modern Western world is that we instinctively divide life into separate compartments. Politics belongs here. Religion belongs there. Faith becomes one option among many others rather than the framework within which all of life is understood.

53. Taylor describes this transition by contrasting what he calls the "porous self" with the "buffered self."

54. Imagine someone swimming underwater. They are completely immersed in the water. It surrounds them on every side. That is the porous self.

55. Now imagine someone standing beside a swimming pool. The pool is there if they choose to swim, but they might just as easily decide to go for a walk or spend an hour at the gym. Swimming is only one option among many. That is the buffered self.

56. For most people in the ancient world, religion was like the water surrounding the swimmer. It was not one aspect of life alongside politics, economics and family life. It was the world in which every aspect of life was lived. Jesus' hearers would never have imagined dividing reality into a religious sphere and a political sphere. They would therefore never have understood Jesus to be saying, "Give politics to Caesar and religion to God."

57. The key to Jesus' answer lies in one word: "image." The Greek word is εἰκών (*eikōn*). We would pronounce it as icon in English. Holding up the denarius, Jesus asks, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

58. "It is Caesar's."

59. The coin bears Caesar's image. It was minted by his authority. It carries his likeness and his inscription. It circulates within his economic system. In that limited sense, it belongs to Caesar. If Caesar demands his coin back in the form of a tax, then give him his coin.

60. But Jesus does not stop there. "...and give to God what belongs to God."

61. The obvious question is: what belongs to God? Every Jew listening to Jesus would immediately have recognised where the conversation was heading.

62. The opening chapter of Genesis declares that humanity has been created in the image of God.

63. We read in Genesis 1: 27: "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them."

64. Significantly, the Greek translation of Genesis, the Septuagint, uses exactly the same word that Jesus has just used: εἰκών (eikōn). That is no coincidence.

65. To understand what Genesis means, we need to remember the world in which it was written. Throughout the ancient Near East, every temple contained an image of its god. Here you can see a reconstruction of the interior of the Temple of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens. Dominating the sanctuary stood the colossal image of the goddess Athena. Anyone entering the temple expected to encounter the image of the deity at its heart.

66. The same was true throughout the Greek and Roman world. Here you can see a reconstruction of the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus —Artemis whom the Romans called Diana. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The focal point of this magnificent sanctuary was the image of the goddess. The image did not replace the deity. Rather, it represented the deity's presence and authority within the temple. A temple without the image of its god would have been unthinkable

67. Now listen carefully to the rhythm of Genesis. Day by day, God brings order out of chaos. Day 1: Light is separated from darkness.

68. Day 2: The waters above are separated from the waters below.

69. Day 3: Dry land appears and the earth brings forth vegetation.

70. During these first three days, God establishes the great realms or domains of creation. He prepares the world to be inhabited.

71. Day 4: The heavens are filled with the sun, moon and stars.

72. Day 5: The waters teem with fish and the skies with birds.

73. Day 6: The earth is filled with every kind of living creature, and finally with human beings

74. God first establishes the realms; then he fills them with their proper inhabitants. Everything is in its proper place. Everything has its proper purpose.

75. Then, on the seventh day, God rests. In the ancient world, this was not the language of weariness but of kingship. When a temple had been prepared, the deity entered it, took up residence there and ruled from it. Genesis is making the astonishing claim that the whole ordered creation is God's Temple.

76. By now, every ancient reader would instinctively ask, "Where is the image?" Every temple had one. Every temple was built to house one. Without the image, the temple made no sense.

77. The image of Athena dominated the Parthenon in Athens.

78. The image of Artemis—whom the Romans called Diana—dominated the great temple at Ephesus. If creation itself is God's Temple, then where is God's image? Genesis gives an answer unlike anything else in the ancient world. God does not place an idol of wood, stone or gold within his Temple.

79. Instead, he places living men and women there. Humanity is God's image.

80. But Genesis does not stop there. It immediately explains why. "Let us make humankind in our image ... and let them have dominion." Those two statements belong together. We are not first made in God's image and then, almost as an afterthought, given a task to perform. Our vocation flows from our identity. We are God's image because we have been entrusted with God's work.

81. God chooses to exercise his wise and loving rule through those whom he has made in his image. We are called to reflect his wisdom in our decisions, his justice in the way we treat others, his mercy towards the weak, his holiness in the way we live, and his love in every relationship. This is what human beings were created for.

82. What might this look like in practice? I am reminded of St Charles de Foucauld, who spent many years living among the Muslim people of the Sahara Desert. He once explained that he was not trying to convert them, but to understand them and to look upon every person as a beloved brother or sister.

83. His ambition was disarmingly simple. "I would like to be sufficiently good," he wrote, "that people would say, 'If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?'"

84. This icon captures his vocation perfectly. Charles does not point to himself; he points to Christ. That is what an icon does. It is not an end in itself. It is a window that directs our gaze beyond itself to the one it reveals. That is also the vocation of every Christian. We are called to become living icons, so that through our lives others catch a glimpse of Christ.

85. Now Jesus' answer takes on an entirely new depth. The coin bears Caesar's image. It belongs to Caesar because it carries his likeness. But you bear God's image.

86. You belong to God because you carry his likeness into the world.

87. Jesus has done far more than escape a cleverly constructed trap. His opponents wanted to debate taxation.

88. Jesus transformed the discussion into one about identity and vocation. Caesar's authority is real, but it is limited. Caesar may rightly claim his coins because they bear his image.

89. But God claims the men and women who bear his image.

90. So the real question is not whether Caesar receives his tax.

91. The real question is whether those who bear God's image are being faithful to their vocation as God's image-bearers.

92. Our calling is to become living icons of Christ, so that, through who we are and all that we do, others may catch a glimpse of the God whose image we bear.