

October 22, 2017 God's Image Homily: Some of you may be familiar with a comedy routine made famous by, among others, the legendary comedy team of Abbot and Costello. Bud Abbot, an irascible bully, always sought to take advantage of his simple minded partner, Lou Costello in their act. And he often used guile to gain an upper hand in any dispute. In the skit, Abbot hopes to settle a disagreement by flipping a coin. "Heads I win, tails you lose", he declares. The naïve and doltish Costello offers no objection. Bud Abbot is guaranteed a win.

The comedic genius of Abbot and Costello attracted a large, appreciative audience. But what unfolds in the gospel reading is not light comedy, but high drama with enormous implications for the followers of Jesus.

In today's gospel (Mt.22:15-22), Jesus engages in a debate with his determined detractors, the temple officials. The chief priests and elders of the chosen people want to entangle him in a controversy that is volatile for the Jews of his day, namely, the paying of a census tax to the Roman government. The Greek word translated as "entrap" (Mt.15:22) in the reading is a rarely used hunting term, and means a snare or a trap. Again, their sole objective is to discredit and embarrass him. Whether Jesus answers yes or no, he is lost, and can't escape. If he approves of the tax, he'll be labeled a friend of the Romans and a traitor to his own people, who bitterly resented the tax imposed on them, a subject people. If he opposes the tax, he'll likely be reported to the Roman authorities and be in danger of arrest and accused of seditious activity.

But Jesus turns the table on them by deflecting their question and zeroing in on the Roman coin, the Denarius. Ancient coins bore images and inscriptions. The Roman coin carried the image of Tiberius Caesar, the divine emperor. The image of the world's most powerful ruler was a bitter reminder to the Jews that they were a subject people, and under the yoke of the powerful Roman government. In addition, the image on the face of the coin offended their sensibilities inasmuch as they found graven images unacceptable. Remarkably, Our Lord shows little interest in the image found on the coin. The image on a coin pales in significance to the image of God in each of his creatures. We recall the grand words from the first book of the bible, Genesis, "God created man in his own image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them". (Gen.1:27) There is nothing in us which is not stamped with God's image. True, the image is sometimes worn down or covered with dirt and grime. But it is never lost completely. Sin may dim the light in the human soul, but Christ, the Light of the World, has a plan to restore what has been lost.

In his classic book, *"The Life of Christ"*, the late Bishop Fulton Sheen, one of the twentieth century's great evangelists, offers a profound reflection on this incident. He writes, "That coin (presented to Jesus) bore the image of Caesar but whose image did the questioners bear? Was it not the image of God Himself? It was this image he was interested in restoring."

In the Western world, the Divine image has been tarnished in an increasingly unbelieving, aggressively anti-religious culture. Preborn Life is disposable, natural rights are disrespected, and a casual disregard of basic human decency are flouted. Once the image has been rejected, humans are reduced to objects that are more easily replaceable or discarded.

If you should ever inspect the image of a noted American president on a coin, consider as well the divine image that can't be seen by any human being, only the Lord Himself.

Amen!