

October 19, 2014 God Inscribed

Check out the coin on the front cover of the bulletin.

Meet Tiberius.

If you were a Jew in the first century, this is how you would meet him.

On a coin...the denarius.

Tiberius was Caesar, the emperor of The Roman Empire, from 14 AD to 37 AD.

Tiberius never came to Israel. It wasn't worth his time.

Tiberius never gave speeches on television. There weren't any.

He was never interviewed for the front page of the newspaper. There weren't any.

He never put up highway billboards, printed up campaign door hangers, or released announcements on social media. There weren't any.

There were three ways you knew Tiberius.

Through the words of the local leaders put in place by Rome.

Through the army that marched down your street and kept the Roman peace.

And through the coin, the denarius, with which you paid taxes.

The coin.

No dates.

The dating system with which you are familiar doesn't begin until ten centuries later.

There is a picture...and some words.

The picture on it would be the reigning Caesar.

The words? Inscriptions put into the coin to tell you something.

They told you what the Caesar wanted you to know about him.

I learned this week that some Caesars had as many as 200 different inscriptions on the coins, depending on what message they wanted to get out to the empire.

The denarius was the propaganda machine of Rome.

The denarius was not just a unit of currency...

It was all about authority, power, allegiance, loyalty.

So what did Tiberius want you to know?

In Latin and abbreviations, this is what you can read on the coin:

"Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus".

By the way, you can buy this coin on ebay...and in the rare coins section of Amazon.

So Tiberius wanted you to know who his dad was...and that he was son of the divine.

This inscription is a message of honor and significance.

It is making a claim about power and authority.

It is announcing that the world revolves around him.

The inscription and the likeness printed on the coin said everything.

Inscription is at the very heart of our Gospel story today.

The story begins with manipulation.

The Pharisees called out to Jesus and said, "Teacher."

The Pharisees did not consider Jesus a teacher.

They considered themselves to be the teachers.

They were just flattering him, buttering him up for the kill.

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere."

The Pharisees did not consider Jesus sincere.

They considered him a false speaker, a liar, a phony, a pretender.

They considered themselves the sincere speakers.

They said to Jesus, "You teach the way of God in accordance with truth."

The Pharisees did not think Jesus spoke for God.

They thought they did.

The Pharisees said, "You show deference to and partiality for no one."

They spoke the truth here.

Jesus was always about including the outcast.

It was the Pharisees who showed deference and partiality.

The Pharisees began with a four-fold manipulation of Jesus.

Then they moved to the trick question.

You know what a trick question is.

It makes you say something that you don't want to say.

It manipulates you and forces you to answer in a certain way.

Here is the trick question: Should we pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

Why is that a trick question?

If Jesus answered the question with a "No," he would be in trouble with the Herodians, those people who were followers of King Herod, the puppet ruler put there by Rome.

If Jesus said "No," the Herodians would simply call over the Roman soldiers and have Jesus arrested for treason and speaking against the state.

If Jesus answered “Yes” to the question about paying taxes to Caesar, he would immediately become very unpopular.

The Jewish people hated paying taxes to the Roman occupation of their land.

The zealots were constantly calling the Jewish people to revolt and throw off this oppression.

It was only the threat of the Roman soldiers that prevented this.

If Jesus answered Yes or No to the trick question, he would immediately be eliminated as a threat to the Pharisees.

He called for a coin. On the coin was a picture of the emperor.

On the back side would be various inscriptions.

They included: high priest, divine leader, son of God.

That was the problem.

A Jewish person could not accept those claims about the emperor.

Those claims are contrary to the faith.

They are violations of the first and second commandments.

The emperor is not God. Can't be. We know who God is, and the emperor isn't it.

To hold a coin with those inscriptions meant that you belonged to the emperor.

You were attached to the emperor.

You gave the emperor ultimate honor, significance, meaning in your life.

No believer could do that.

Jesus could not have such a coin in his pocket because he could not have such an inscription in his spirit.

Jesus did not give the Pharisees the answer they were seeking.

He avoided the trick question.

He answered the question not from a political perspective but from a spiritual one.

Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”

What are the things that belong to the emperor?

Taxes. Coins. Laws. Give the emperor those things.

What are the things that belong to God?

Remember the great commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart.

God wants your heart, your worship, your value system, your priorities, your time, your commitment, your first fruits, your loyalty, your allegiance.

Take a look at each person. Whose inscription is written on them?
 The emperor's? Certainly not.
 God's inscription is written on us.
 We are made in the image of God.
 God has claimed us. We do not belong to anyone or anything else.
 We belong to God with all our being, with all our talents, our interests, our time,
 our wealth.
 In other words, with all our heart.

On Monday, I was making home visits.
 As is my custom, I selected a Scripture reading from my prayer book to share.
 I ended up with a reading from Isaiah, words of God to ancient Israel and modern
 day Minnesota.
 The reading ended with these words: *I will never forget you. See; I have inscribed
 you on the palms of my hands.*
 Inscription. Inscribed on the palms of God's hands.
 What is God saying through the prophet?
 That we belong to God, that we live in relationship with God, and that
 relationship is what's most important.

On Thursday, I was at a Pastor's meeting in Hibbing.
 The worship leader read The Great Sheema.
 As you hear these words, think about inscription.
*Hear, O Israel; the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your
 God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.
 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.
 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when
 you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.
 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and
 write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

See, that's what God wants for you.
 For God is written on your heart...inscribed into your spirit.
 Worthy of your honor. What's most important.
 You belong to God.
 Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor.
 But give to God what belongs to God.