

Making an Impression

In the name of him who delivers us from the wrath to come, dear friends in Christ: Pause for a moment to recall the last time that something or someone really impressed you. Got it in your mind? Okay, now ask yourself what specifically about that thing or person was it that you found so impressive? Was it something you noticed immediately? Or was it something that was hidden at first but then revealed itself rather unexpectedly later on? They say that first impressions are important. It's especially true when you're looking for a job. You have to put your best foot forward and do what you can to make a potential employer sit up and take notice of you right away, otherwise he's already moved on and is looking at the next candidate. So yes, in some cases first impressions are key. But not always. I've learned over the years that I'm not particularly good at first impressions. For the past several years I've taught breakaway sectionals at the higher things conferences we take the youth to in the summer. The folks that wander into my class, they don't know me. And what they see when they walk in is a nondescript middle aged guy standing up there who hasn't got set up all that high-speed computer gadgetry that they're used to with which to make a flashy PowerPoint presentation. They think they're in for a very dry, hour long lecture. That isn't what they get. And so a consistent comment I'll get in the reviews they write is "I walked in without expecting much, but wow, I learned a lot and it was really interesting." So yes, first impressions can be important; but in my own view, what matters in the long run are the impressions that last.

I mention this because two of today's readings have to do with impressions. But before we get to them, let's consider for a moment what that word really means. To impress literally means to press an image onto something, like when a fancy letter is closed with a seal pushed into hot wax. Likewise in the office we've got a device that presses our church's seal onto official documents like baptism and confirmation certificates. When you impress something, a foreign object is used to make its mark – a representation of itself – on something else. When we talk about a *person* being impressed, we're using the word in a figurative way. The idea is that whatever it is that's doing the impressing is making its indelible mark on your mind and memory and who knows, maybe even more than that. But we're getting there.

Okay, with this in mind we turn to today's Gospel, in which Jesus is asked the question about the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar. It was a point of contention for the Jews. No one liked paying taxes, of course, no one ever does; but they especially hated paying taxes to the Romans who'd conquered them. It was humiliating. Upping the ante a bit, the hard line religious conservatives thought it was morally wrong to support that pagan government. They saw it as an act of idolatry. They knew that some of their taxes were being used to build and maintain temples to false gods. This was a private teaching, however. You couldn't go around saying this publicly without being arrested as a rebel. And apparently the religious folks who held this view lacked the courage of their convictions. They paid their taxes like everyone else.

But they think they've got Jesus in an airtight trap when they bring the question to him *publicly*. If he says, "Yes, sure, it's all right to pay taxes to Caesar", the Jews will see Jesus as a pro-Roman traitor. And if he says, "No, it's not right", then they can bring him up on charges of treason against Rome. They think they've got him no matter which way he turns.

Turns out they're wrong; but it's worth noting how Jesus so cleverly escapes their trap. He asks to see a coin – the kind that was in common usage throughout the Roman Empire, and

which, by the way, made trade a lot easier. Everyone benefited from the common Roman currency, as they did from Roman roads, Roman bridges, Roman aqueducts, and Roman garrisons that kept the peace, maintained security, and prosecuted criminals. As much as the Jews hated the Romans, they gained a lot from the impression that Rome had stamped on their world. So, now Jesus asks, "Whose likeness and image is impressed upon this coin?" They answer, "Caesar's". And Jesus replies, "Then give to Caesar what belongs to him, and to God what belongs to him." So saying, he gives us the principle that in worldly and temporal matters, we owe our allegiance to our earthly rulers, whoever they happen to be. But in higher matters, things moral, spiritual, and eternal, we owe our allegiance to God. And as we heard, the crowd was very *impressed* by the response Jesus gave.

But coupled with today's Epistle reading, this episode got me to thinking. We're still making impressions on coins. Now we use paper too; but we put impressions of men on our money. And to a certain extent for all of us, money is a god. It's what we trust in. It's what we work so hard to get. In a sense, it is what we serve: man's image stamped on lifeless things. It really is a form of idolatry. In a similar way, the Romans and other pagans impressed human images on stone and metal to make idols of their gods: Zeus and Neptune, Hera and Venus, Mercury and Apollo: all very human in appearance. And these they worshipped, served, and trusted in: the image of man stamped on lifeless things.

But we read in Scripture that the Lord God does pretty much the opposite. In Genesis, when he formed our first parents, it says that God impressed his own image on them. He then breathed his Spirit into the people he made and they became living beings. Mankind was designed to be God's image on living things: God's image of love, of sacrificial service, of total commitment, and absolute truthfulness. Now, in the fall into sin, we lost that. But the whole Scripture is about the Lord working to impress upon us his perfect image once again.

This is what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle. It's the opening of his letter to the church at Thessalonica – a church that he himself helped to establish only a few months earlier. A little background on that will be helpful for us to understand all that's being said.

It was during Paul's second great mission journey, which, in God's wisdom, took Paul and his companions much farther than they ever planned to go. They thought they'd just expand a bit from what they'd done the first time, evangelizing the towns and villages on the eastern end of what's Turkey today; but instead the Lord sent them into Greece and to some of the major cities and trading centers of the ancient world. The Lord's plans turned out to be a lot bigger than Paul's. So it was that they came to Philippi, and there they planted the first Christian church on the continent of Europe. It was a great accomplishment – one that Satan obviously considered a defeat for his side. He decided to fight back. So, it happened that while Paul was in Philippi that he was falsely accused of disturbing the peace and of unlawful teaching. The city magistrates, without even giving Paul and his companions a fair hearing, ordered that they receive a severe public beating. It was carried out immediately – which was a major problem, not just for Paul and the others who were beaten, but also for the magistrates. They didn't realize that Paul was a Roman citizen. They didn't bother to ask either; but it was grave offense to punish a citizen without a trial. If it became known, if Paul complained to higher authorities, these magistrates would at very least lose their jobs, and more likely be punished themselves. But the evidence was right before them. They had left the mark of their crime upon the bodies of these men. They wanted the problem to go away, so they pretty much ran Paul and the others, as politely and apologetically as they could, out of town.

So Paul and his companions with no small effort limped their way over to Thessalonica, the next major city on their route. And following their normal practice, they first went the local Jewish synagogue in order to proclaim Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all God's Messianic Promises. But imagine the first impression those people had of Paul: he's come to them black and blue. He can hardly stand straight. He's covered with hideous raised welts and bloody sores where the skin has split open. He's a mess. And it's obvious to anyone that he's been punished as a criminal, so on top of his suffering, he's regarded with shame and contempt – as someone who likely had it coming. When he rises to speak to them the first time, they cannot have been expecting much. He would have looked like a transient beggar or shiftless criminal. They would have expected him to either beg outright or to try deceive them with a conman's tale of woe.

But that isn't what happened. Instead of begging for their coins, Paul gave them the infinite treasure that is Jesus. And they were quite impressed, not by his appearance, obviously, but by the Word of God's grace and mercy in Jesus that he proclaimed. And I do mean they were impressed – not just in a figurative way, no; through Paul's preaching, the Holy Spirit wrote the Word of God and Gospel of Jesus Christ on their hearts. The Lord used Paul's words and the power of the Spirit to impress Jesus the Savior who suffered and died for sin upon them. Thus they received the Gospel with joy and full conviction – so much conviction that they stood steadfast when almost immediately some of them were called upon to suffer for their faith in Jesus.

And so it is that Paul writes to them now, several months later, to encourage them and instruct them in a few things that he simply didn't have the time to get to when he was with them. And as you look at Paul's words to them in today's text, at first brush it sounds like he's saying that he's very impressed with them and the way they have been living the Christian life. But if you look a bit deeper, you'll see that what he's really saying is that he's impressed with what the Lord has been doing among them. He thanks God for the faith that God himself gave them. He thanks God for their being chosen to receive and trust the Good News – their having been chosen proven by the way the Word of Christ was received by them with such power and conviction.

He then goes on to say that the great faith in Jesus they are displaying is making an impression on others. He tells them, "You have become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia [which were provinces in Greece]. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia (that is, through their enthusiastic sharing of the Gospel), but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report to us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned from idols to serve the living and true God." Paul is saying that everywhere we go we hear other churches talking about you guys. Just as God impressed you with the image of Jesus Christ when he made you believers, so you are making an impression upon others by your faithful words and actions. They are looking to you as the model to imitate of what it means to be faithful to God in Christ.

Think about the effect of these words on the Thessalonian Christians. Surely it would be nice to know that others were looking to you as their example; but it would also make you conscious of your need to continue to press onward. If you're setting the standard, you can't afford to slack off. Knowing that they were impressing others would tend to push them deeper into the Word of Christ by which God was putting his mark upon them.

And that is the lesson for us. Whether we know it or not, I can guarantee that others, both people inside and outside the church of Christ, are looking at us as examples of what it means to be followers of Jesus. I wonder: are they impressed? And if so, what are they impressed with? What are their initial impressions? And what are the impressions we leave upon them that last? These are questions that need to be asked. And I think it's safe to say that we have plenty of room for improvement, both in the way we communicate our faith and in the way we live it.

Therefore may God in his mercy continue to impress upon us the image of his Son by his Word and Spirit. May he open our hearts to receive his Truth and our minds to understand it, so that modeling the Christian faith as did the Thessalonians, we may help lead others to Christ that they too may be impressed by him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!