

A Meditation on the Gloria in excelsis, “Image” in the Story of Jesus and the Question of Paying Taxes to Caesar and on the Collect of the Day

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Proper 24A – Matthew 22:34-46

I’ve started to go through the liturgy talking about its different parts, trying to give you some background on each, trying to explain why each is where it is in the service. We’re continuing today with the Gloria in Excelsis, which is that first piece of service music we sang. And we’re rather fortunate, because the Gloria and today’s gospel just happen to intertwine.

The key to this gospel is when Jesus asks whose image is on the coin which his challengers give him. And his questioners say, “Caesar’s.” Then Jesus says, “Give to Caesar Caesar’s things and to God, give God’s things.”

Now in the ancient world, coinage was believed to be the personal property of the monarch or institution who issued it. It was on loan, one might say, to anyone who used it. So in a very real sense, the coin with Caesar’s image on it was Caesar’s. In addition, the identification between coin and monarch receives a bit more light when one realizes that defacing the image of the emperor on a coin could get one charged with treason. The assumption was that what one did to the image one was capable of doing to the original. What one did to the image one was capable of doing to the reality behind the image. And the reality behind the image and the image were, somehow, bound together so that the power of the original is expressed in the image. There are plenty of instances in the history of the Roman Empire, of a rioting city which pulled down the emperor’s statue and was then charged, not just with destruction of public property, but with high treason. And were sometimes punished accordingly. So strong was the perceived connection between image and original, between picture and reality.

So that gives a bit of background on what’s at stake in the question asked of Jesus. It’s about more than taxes. It has in back of it the whole question of the relationship between the divine and civil government, of loyalties to the different powers which shape human life.

When Jesus says, “. . . and give to God the things which are God’s” he’s using this old understanding of image. Of course that which is stamped on us

is the image of God, as the image of Caesar was stamped on the coin. So when he says, "Give to Caesar the things which are Caesar's and to God the things which are God's," he's really being very nasty and putting Caesar in his place because he is saying, "Give Caesar the money and give God yourselves." And let's get things here in a proper perspective. Caesar gets the bits of metal, God gets all of human existence. So it's no wonder the Romans executed him as a revolutionary.

Now, what has this to do with the Gloria? The Gloria's text begins, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth." And, by the way, where does that come from?

Ans: The Angelic Song sung at the birth of Jesus.

Right. It's the Angelic Song from Luke's gospel sung to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus. (Luke 2:14) By the way, just for you people who like trivia and esoterica and things like that, Episcopalians being Episcopalians we sit on the fence and split the difference on all kinds of issues. There is a little translation problem with the Angelic song. Should it be, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth." Or is it "...and on earth peace, good will towards men"? You'll hear it in different Bible translations rendered different ways. Well, the Episcopal Church does it the former way in Rite II Eucharists and the latter in Rite I. So we get both translations inside our worship. Very typical Episcopalian politics.

Now "glory" is the opposite face of "image." We are made in the image of God, but God, making something in his image, is expressing his glory. In other words, God's glory is that of God which human beings can see, appreciate, respond to. A kind of clumsy, but perhaps communicative, way of saying this would be, "God's glory is God's expression upwards."

The Gloria starts out saying, "Glory to God in the highest..." In other words, may God's self-expression in heaven be present here on earth. May this be something which is apprehensible to us, something which we perceive, adopt, and incorporate into ourselves and our world. And so you see, the whole sense with which the Gloria starts is appropriate to the beginning of Christian worship: may who God is in heaven, may who God is in God's own selfhood, be something which we can apprehend, appreciate and respond to here. The sense of that connection is foundational to the very possibility of Christian worship. If it is absent, you are merely trying to appease an irrational deity who may get up on the wrong side of the bed in the morning and arbitrarily decide to destroy you today even though yesterday was full of grace. There have been and are plenty of religions with ideas of God more or less like that.

But this idea of who God is, in and of himself, of God's character expressing itself in this world, points toward a consistency which makes God trustworthy and therefore a suitable object for worship. So that's the idea of glory. Glory is God expressing his true being, that unchanging core of utterly ultimate reality, in our direction.

Now look at the entire text of the Gloria. It's a complicated development of a single idea, that Jesus takes away the sin(s) of the world. In all the Gloria this is the only thing we actually ask God to do, to take away the sin(s) of the world.

This is, by the way, another place where Episcopalians straddle the translation fence. One school of translation opts for “sin.” another for “sins.” Is it “sin” or “sins”? Well, in Rite I it is “sins” and in Rite II it is “sin.” Once again, we have successfully avoided having to settle down on any one side of a disputed question.

There is a significant theological difference between the two translations. If Christ takes away the sin of the world he is removing the root cause of all alienation from God. If he takes away the sins of the world that means he’s dealing, one at a time, with the results of alienation as they occur. There is a difference between the two. Now the Christian position, of course, is that Christ is quite capable of doing both. But it’s hard to get both ideas into the same piece of rhetoric. And so, as in the rest of the Liturgy, we split things that really happen all at once, split very complicated actual things into concepts and analytical notions in order that by talking about them separately we be enabled to talk about them at all. Christ takes away both the sin and sins of the world, but it’s hard to say both at the same time. So we split something which happens all at once into two separate things for the sake of being able to talk about what we’re doing.

This gets people into a great deal of trouble, because they want to treat these split things not as analytical concepts to help us understand complex wholes, but as things in themselves. And it’s kind of dangerous to confuse your analytical methodology and tools with the thing you are analyzing. So, if I were a finger wagger, I would now wag my finger and say, “Don’t make that mistake.”

Now, the Gloria’s history. It started out in the Eastern Church, where it was a hymn in their service of morning worship, the first service of the day, what people did right after they got up. It wasn’t Eucharistic, but family or monastic worship. The use of the Gloria in the Eucharist is a Western peculiarity.

The Gloria then moves west. Everything in our worship seems to start in the East and move west, that is practically a given. During the reign of Pope Symmachus (498-514) it was introduced into the worship of the Roman Church, but only for use in services at which a bishop was presiding and then only on Sundays and the feasts of martyrs. Before the twelfth century it was not used by priests during ordinary Sunday worship, although there is evidence of agitation to gain permission for priests to do so. You see, conflict over liturgical revision has been with us for a long time.

In these western Medieval services the Gloria was usually used in the same place we have it in our worship, close to the beginning of the service. Now when Thomas Cranmer constructed the first Book of Common Prayer (1549) he retained this Medieval practice. But because it was usually a sung part of the service, and because it was somewhat repetitive, the Puritans called vociferously for its removal. By the way, what would be other reasons the Puritans might want to get rid of the Gloria?

Well, it’s biblical, but it’s not just biblical quotation. It’s full of biblical quotation and allusion, but they are expanded and rearranged. And the Puritans were really uncomfortable with expanding and rearranging Biblical quotations. You had to take it all straight. (Not that they didn’t mix and match Biblical

material themselves in their sermons.) They put a lot of pressure on Cranmer to get rid of the Gloria. Cranmer then pulled one of the more slippery pieces of liturgical politics on record. He moved the Gloria from its Medieval position as a poetic beginning of the Eucharist to a new, completely non-traditional position as a prose ending. If you look at the older prayer books of the American church you will discover the Gloria printed as a prose prayer toward the end of the Eucharist service, just where Cranmer put it to hide it from the Puritans. He was successful in his subterfuge and the Gloria remained a part, although a misplaced one, of Anglican worship. Then along come the liturgical reformers of the last century and, in the latest revision of our Prayer Book, the Gloria gets pulled out of Cranmer's cubby hole, where he hid it, and replaced as a poetic introduction and preparation to the service, just where the Medieval folks had had it.

Structurally, the Gloria has three paragraphs. The first is an address to God, the second is an expanded petition to God, what we want him to do, and the third is a list of titles or characteristics of God by reason of which we believe God will grant the petition in the second paragraph.

OK, that's about the Gloria. Now a couple of words on the next item in the service, which is the Collect of the Day. You will note in your worship booklet that the collect isn't there. It just says "The celebrant says the collect." Why isn't the text there?

Ans: It changes every week.

Right, you'd have to have a pretty thick book if we were to print all the collects. By the time you had found the right collect we'd be half way through the Epistle lesson. Now one of the reasons for this set of lectures is to ground you in the technical language of Episcopal Worship. Episcopalian public worship is generally divided into two parts. Does anyone know the names of the parts?

OK. They are the proper and the common. All required, essential parts of Episcopalian public worship are either part of the common or the proper. The proper is everything which changes, because that is proper to the particular day. The common is everything which stays the same all the time, that doesn't change, because that is common or universal, used every time that particular form of worship is used. Common here is used in the same way as "common" in the Book of Common Prayer. The collects, because they change every Sunday, are parts of the proper. The other parts of the proper would be the assigned lessons from the Bible, the Psalm, the Proper Preface, and certain acclamations including the opening greeting, which change with the church's seasons. Let me see – there's actually not much else. The lessons, the collects and the preface – that's a fair portion of what goes on in the service.

Ans: And the hymns.

OK. But the hymns are part neither of the proper nor the common. First, they don't change in a predictable way, there aren't hymns assigned by rubric to be sung on particular days. For the third Sunday of Epiphany, for instance, you don't know what hymns will be sung, that's at the discretion of the celebrant, but you do know what lessons and collects will be used. Now if we were Ethiopian Orthodox or Coptic or Syrian Orthodox there would be hymns

which were part of the proper. All those Eastern Churches have great reams of hymns written to go with particular days of the church's year and you sing that particular hymn on that particular day – it's proper to the day. In that case the hymns would be part of the proper, but not with us.

The second and primary reason hymns are not part of the proper is that their very presence in the Eucharist, or any service from the Book of Common Prayer, is optional. They ornament the service but are not essential to it – and very wonderful and helpful ornaments they are.

Now collects are supposed to set the theme for the day. That's why they are at the beginning of the service. In theory, if you listen carefully to the collect you know what the main point is from which the rest of the service is to be interpreted. Sometimes you have to stretch to find it, but in theory that's what happens.

Collects are tightly structured prayers. First comes an opening address to God. Since human beings have made themselves many gods, it is important that we identify which one we address. Then there is an optional listing of a characteristic of God by means of which we have reason to hope the actual request will be granted. Then comes the request or petition itself. Then an optional statement of benefits which will result if the request is granted. Then some kind of Trinitarian closure. All collects are structured the same way. Just to read through the collects is to read, by the way, a very helpful little essay on Anglican theology. The collects express the theology of the church as it is to be expressed and remembered in her worship.

Now, let's look at today's collect – not in my judgment one of the greater collects, but adequate to illustrate the form. First comes the address, "Almighty and everlasting God . . ." That's whom we are talking to. Given the human proclivity to create all different sorts of gods, it's important to identify the specific god we intend to address. "...in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations..." There is the characteristic of God by means of which we hope God will grant the petition we request. That is, in the past God has demonstrated an interest in the course of human history. The Hebrew interpretation of their own story as recorded in the Old Testament is the best example. "Preserve the works of your mercy..." this is the petition proper, what we are asking for. In other words, what you have begun to do, in the saving of creation, continue to do. Be involved in human history, be involved in trying to bend it toward your will. Then here is the result clause, the benefits to be gained if God grants the petition: "...That your church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your name..." If that which God has begun is not carried on, if the church is not active among the nations, then the church, of course, won't be able to persevere in its work. If the nations oppose the work of the church, the church's faithfulness to its task becomes much more difficult. Then the close, "...through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you one God for ever and ever. Amen."

So, that same structure, more or less elaborated, marks all collects. They all ask for only one thing, and that one thing they ask for sets the theme for the liturgy of the day.

Now, just a hair on the history of collects and then we'll call it quits for the day. Collects are the one part of our liturgy which is indubitably western. They are inventions of the western church; there are no comparable forms in Eastern Christianity. If you read the liturgies of Eastern Christian churches you rapidly discover that they have a gift for flowery language. What a Roman would say in two sentences they are quite happy to say in a page. So the succinct quality of collects is typically Roman. Collects are found in Western Churches but not Eastern ones.

Early collects are preserved in a good many medieval books copied in monasteries and called sacramentaries. Monasteries were, of course, storehouses of everything related to worship. With something which changed not only every Sunday, but also every feast day, you had to have written records, written copies of these things. So monasteries would copy great collections of these collects and the other elements of the proper of the service. If you ever want to engage in an incredibly esoteric and technical study, you can trace the history of individual collects as they bounce around from being used on one day in one monastic community to being used on another day in a cathedral halfway across Europe and a third day in a chapel royal. There is a whole complicated network of change. A collect used for Christmas day at Hildesheim may be used, in the Sarum Rite of Southern England, for the Feast of St. Mary the Egyptian and in southern France on the name day of the local church. So these collects are written and then have a complex history of bouncing around the church year. We're still doing this. For instance, the collect for the Holy Eucharist (p. 201 and 252 in our present Book of Common Prayer) was originally composed by Thomas Aquinas as a collect for the Feast of Corpus Christi. In the Scottish Book of Common Prayer for 1929 it was appointed as an optional collect for Maundy Thursday and in the current American book it is a general collect for days concerned with the Holy Eucharist. As you can see, collects wander throughout the church's year.

So this process of trying to get a good fit between the content of the collect and what the days of the church year are about is an ongoing process.

Ok. That's enough esoterica, triviata, and marginalia for today.

Question: Why are they called collects?

Now that is a question I can answer. Along about the reign of Pope Gregory the Great, which if I remember was 590-604, there was a series of congregational prayers at the beginning of the service in addition to those which came later. You see, if prayer is a good thing then you do it more than once. So, about the time Pope Gregory comes along people are beginning to complain about the length of the service. Some things just aren't new under the sun. So, in order to shorten the service, Pope Gregory suppressed the initial set of the prayers of the people, in which the deacon stood before the congregation and called out categories of things to pray for and the people would add, aloud, their own prayers following the deacon's general bidding. (See the Good Friday Solemn Collects for an example of this sort of prayer.) The collect of the day was the general summary of the community's prayer, to collect the whole mass of their prayers and offer them to God. The name stuck to the prayer, even after there

were no prayers of the community to collect, at least in that location at the beginning of the service. So the name was created by an historical accident. Now, of course, we think of the function of the collect as enabling us to collect ourselves and focus on an understanding of what the day is about.

So the origin of this use of the word “collect” is in the loss of an initial set of the prayers of the people and the retention of the final summary prayer of the priest.

OK. I think that’s about enough of that.