

“Decus et Tutamen” - 29 Sunday (A)

Have you noticed that there is often an inscription on the edge of pound coins? In fact, the Royal Mint uses three different inscriptions. One reads in Latin, ‘DECUS ET TUTAMEN,’ which means ‘an ornament and a safeguard.’ The Mint has been using that inscription since the seventeenth century. In those days and long after, people would clip the edge of coins to steal their precious metal; if your coin’s inscription had been damaged you knew that your coin was worth less than it should be. Clipping isn’t a problem now; the real value of the metals in a pound coin today is only 4.75 p.

The other two inscriptions honour Scotland and Wales. ‘NEMO ME IMPUNE LACESSIT’ is the motto of the Scottish Order of the Thistle. It means, ‘No-one provokes me with impunity.’ The final inscription is something in Welsh (‘PLEIDIOL WYF I’M GWLAD’) which I have no idea how to pronounce but I do know that it comes from the Welsh National Anthem and can be translated as, ‘True am I to my country.’

The Pharisees in today’s Gospel are attracted to Jesus but they also disagree with him, so they are trying to get Jesus into trouble. They don’t seem to care with whom just as long as he is discredited. If Jesus says, ‘Pay the tax,’ his fellow Jews will despise him. If he says, ‘Don’t pay the tax,’ the Romans will arrest him for rebellion. Now fair taxes, justice and peace all matter but they are not what most matters. What matters is whether the Pharisees will come to know who they are trying to destroy. They think of Jesus as trouble but the real answer of his identity is on the edge of the coin he has handed back to them. The Pharisees thought of the coin as a means of Jesus’ destruction but in fact it could be their salvation. For on the edge of the coin the Emperor Augustus had put this inscription to describe himself: Son of God. No, he died and his body was burned on a pyre but Jesus - he rose from the dead.

Once you come to know that Jesus is the Son of God, everything changes. You discover what it means to live as humans should - like Jesus. You realise what is the context of your life - eternity. And you become aware of the greatest truth - you have been created out of love and shall always be loved.

The Pharisees, however, not believing in Jesus kicked against him. They rejected his teaching, as we often do in our life of faith and doubt. We fear to live as Jesus lived and how he taught us because of the sacrifices it will entail, not realising, for example, that when obese it is a sacrifice to diet but the result is no on-going sacrifice but a blessing. To believe in the inscription on the coin will lead to your life changing, and at times those changes will be hard, but will pass into a life truly worth living.

Hold out your hand. Let Jesus place the coin on your palm. Read the inscription: the Son of God. Believe and be changed.