Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God
and fall down before his footstool; \*
he is the Holy One.

Although Jesus is Holy, he is a tricky one, but we have had exposure to that.  Actually I think that each person of the Triune God is tricky, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  But in today’s passage, Jesus is not to be out-foxed. And that is okay and it is good.  As is Jesus’s very nature, he manages to chide those who would trick him and then trick them back all in one breath.

Why would I possibly say this? It is after all Jesus who calls out the malice makers by asking “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?”  He knows what they are up to. In this passage, in order to understand Jesus’s answer, it is important to understand who are the ones who are trying to trick him. They are a combination of the Pharisees and the Herodians. They get the trap set. The Pharisees are the overly pious ones, they are so very sure that they are following all the laws and are righteous. The Herodians are those aligned with the sitting government of the day. So, the two groups have worked together to come up with the trick question. If Jesus answered that you owe allegiance to the emperor, the Pharisees could cast him out and if he answered you owe allegiance to God, the Herodians would be quick to snatch him up. It is like one of those questions, “have you quit beating your dog?”                   So Jesus is tricky, and yet instructive. His answer doesn’t please both parties, but at least Jesus does not further agitate or anger either party. They can find no fault in his answer. And yet his answer is bigger.  The simple part of his answer, “give to the emperor what is due to the emperor” is straight forward, but how do we interpret “give to God what is due God”?

What is due to God?

Everything, everything, everything. We were born in this world helpless, and we go out helpless. Life itself and breath and all that is good is dependent on God.  We are God’s, we remain God’s, we are never away from God even when we turn away from God.  So the hidden part of what Jesus is saying is, “Sure, pay taxes, but everything else? well, it is all God’s anyway.”

And Jesus’s answer is tricky on yet another score. There is symmetry in his answer in that it dissatisfies both the Pharisees and the Herodians, but there is symmetry on another level too. There is the question of faces.  The coin has been imprinted with the emperor’s face, but where do we find the face of God?

Well, there are kind of two parts to this question. One is from our Exodus story that like Moses, we are not to see the face of God. Moses is to hide and let God in all his power pass by. And yet, the people who heard Jesus would know from Genesis that we are all made in the image of God.  The words are not exactly the same name and image, but neither is God and a person. There is an approximation.

There are some who would interpret the Gospel to be an indication to separate religion and politics. I tend to think that is generally a good idea in theory, realizing that to live as a Christian ends up affecting one’s politics quickly, but that isn’t really the question.  The question is not how do you live as a Christian in a partisan landscape.  The question remains how do you give God God’s due.

The answer is this: You live as people of God, you live as the image of God, you do the work of God. And as in our Epistle reading this morning—-  when you are doing and living the work of God, giving God God’s due, then others can see Christ in you and give thanks for you. They are grateful for you for what you do in your life. It’s not that you are everyone’s best friend, but that you are living as the divine image in the world.

Why does that matter?  It sounds great, but why does it matter?

Well, what else is there that matters?

Over the wall at the monastic enclosure at the Abbey of Gethsemani where Thomas Merton was a monk are the words “God alone.” Those words are not just for monks.  Each of us has but one life, one life in which to be true, to be kind, to be real, to be holy and to reflect all things holy. This is why we give God God’s due, because it is God alone that matters.

Nothing else, God is the Holy One. What is due to God? Everything. And what has God given for us? Everything, everything, everything.