

Sunday 22nd October 2017: TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST.YR A.

Readings: Is 45:1-7  
Ps 96:1-9(10-13)  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Gospel: Matthew 22:15-33 (sermon based on 15-21)

**“Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”**

Timmy didn't want to put his money in the offering plate Sunday morning, so his mother decided to use some hurried creative reasoning with him.

“You don't want that money, honey,” she whispered in his ear. “Quick! Drop it in the plate. It's tainted!”

Horrified, the little boy obeyed.

After a few seconds he whispered, “But, mommy, why was the money tainted? Was it dirty?”

“Oh, no dear,” she replied. “It's not really dirty. It just 'taint yours, and it 'taint mine,” she replied. “It's God's.”

**In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Often times the Pharisees had been put to confusion, and could not find any cause to accuse Jesus of anything that He had hitherto said or done. Though His words and actions were faultless, these men, still from spite, set themselves to seek in every direction for some cause to accuse Him. They knew that He was calling all to turn away from the corruption of the world and the superstitious practices of devotion invented by men, and to fix their thoughts and hopes upon His kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, the Pharisees arranged a question calculated to entrap Him into an offence against the civil government, namely: *Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?* But since there is nothing in the heart of man that God does not see, Jesus, knowing their wickedness, said: *Why do you tempt Me, ye hypocrites? Show Me the coin of the tribute. And they offered Him a penny. And Jesus said to them: Whose image and. inscription is this? They said to Him: Caesar's. Then He said to them: Render, therefore, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are*

## *God's.*

How wonderful this answer, and how perfect the fulfilment of the prescribed Divine Law! So beautifully does He here indicate the middle way between not caring for the things of the world, on the one hand, and the offence of injuring Caesar, on the other, that He proves the perfect freedom of minds, however devoted to God, to discharge all human duties by commanding them to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

If Jesus affirms that taxes should be paid, he alienates the religious nationalists; if he denies that taxes should be paid, then he is subject to arrest by the Romans as a political revolutionary. But the very fact that his accusers could produce the emperor's coin from one of their purses was to admit a Roman obligation: If one used the sovereign's coin then one automatically took on an obligation to the sovereign; in other words, the Pharisees and Herodians, in trying to trap Jesus, answered their own question. But Jesus takes the debate to an even higher level by challenging them to be just as observant in paying their debt to God.

The confrontation over Caesar's coin is not a solution to any church-versus-state controversy; Jesus' response to the Pharisees confronts them – and us – with the demand to act out of our convictions and to take responsibility for our actions.

Jesus appeals to us to look beyond the simplistic politics and black-and-white legalisms represented by the coin and realise that we are called to embrace the values centred in a faith that sees the hand of God in all things and every human being as part of a single family under the providence of God.

The Pharisees who confront Jesus with Caesar's coin are trying to trap him into making a choice between one's country and God. But Jesus' response indicates that one's citizenship does not have to be at odds with one's faith; in fact, when government seeks to provide for the just welfare of its citizens, it becomes a vehicle for establishing the reign of God.

The Romans imposed taxes on a range of matters and justified this based on providing for an ordered society, and for infrastructure like roads and aqueducts that serve the common good. Some Jewish people hoped that Jesus would denounce the Roman authorities and help them in a rebellion. The Pharisees just wanted to get rid of Jesus, and hoped that if they could get him to speak out against the Romans, then they would get rid of him.

Interestingly he didn't criticise Roman governance. It is clear from Jesus response, not just here, but in other passages, that he saw a role for good government in God's plan the lives of people. The same is evident from today's first reading of the prophet Isaiah, where the conquering Persian king Cyrus is regarded as being anointed by God, and providing for the peace and security of the peoples within his kingdom.

It is clear from both the Scriptures and church teaching, that we should be respectful of civil institutions and governments that are providing for the common good. Indeed, the Church has lots to say reminding us we have a Christian duty to collaborate with civil authorities to the good of society.

God and Caesar do not have to be at odds, Jesus tells the Pharisees. In God, we realise the dignity of every man, woman and child, as sons and daughters of God and our brothers and sisters; in setting up systems of government, we provide for the common good of one another and protect the welfare of all, providing for public safety, educational opportunities and clean water and air.

Jesus' answers are not the clear, unambiguous solutions we hope for to these and many other questions. But his response is the heart of living our faith: the struggle to return to God what is God's. Through prayer and discernment, each one of us must do for ourselves the hard work of deciding exactly what is God's will in our complex world of politics, money and human relationships.

In conclusion, may we both give to Caesar and give to God. Jesus calls us all, to be joyful contributors to the governance of our society, both in utilisation of our time, talent and treasure. And he also calls us to confidently give to God and the works of the church in our time, talent and treasure.

Both are areas of stewardship of the resources God provides for us. Really, we are just giving back what God has given to us.

As issues present themselves in the public forum, may we also have the courage, to speak up and be a voice on matters of social justice and social policy. In the words of St Paul, for us today, ***“May we give the Lord glory and honour, show our faith in action, work for love, and persevere through hope in making our world, the place that God desires it to be”***.

Amen.