

## 29<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Matthew 22:15-21

October 16, 2011

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our country is quite familiar with disagreements around the question of paying taxes. Indeed, perhaps the key issue which pushed the thirteen British colonies to call for independence from Great Britain was precisely that: a dispute over taxes. Great Britain levied taxes on her colonies, but the colonists had no direct representation in Parliament. And so, “no taxation without representation” became a rallying cry of those agitating for independence. These days, of course, there are no shortage of debates about the proper role of the government in our lives, and the consequent appropriate level of taxation.

Well, this week there is also a question about taxes in our Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem in the days leading up to his crucifixion, and he is confronted by a group of very focused opponents, whose purpose is to trap him and do away with him. The Pharisees are plotting against him and they’ve joining forces with the Herodians — those who supported king Herod, the head of the puppet state set up by the Romans. These Herodians were collaborators — they were Jews who were willing to work with the occupying power of Rome.

Matthew tells us the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus and said, *“Teacher we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men.”* This is an old game. They’re trying to set Jesus up, by buttering him up. They’re trying to get him off his guard, by flattering him. *“Teacher we know you are true”* — well they know anything but that! They think he’s a great threat. They think he’s a great fraud and liar. But again, they’re trying to set him up, and their question is clever: *“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”*

In Jesus’ time, religion and politics were often tightly connected. And this question raised a volatile subject — both politically and religiously — because the paying of the tax to Caesar was a controversial matter. The Romans were an occupying power, and the vast majority of the Jews resented them deeply, just as any occupied people resent their occupiers.

Now, if there’s anyone that an occupied people like less than the occupiers, it’s probably collaborators. Think of the occupation of many countries in Europe during the Second World War, when Nazi puppet governments were set up. In Norway, for instance, if there was anyone they hated more than the Nazis, it was the Norwegian collaborators. Vidkun Quisling was the chief Norwegian collaborator, and to this day, his name “Quisling” is synonym for “traitor.”

Even so, in Jesus’ day, most Jews hated the Romans — the occupying power. But some, notably the Herodians, were willing to go along, willing to cooperate and collaborate. So listen again to the question with that background in

mind: *“Is it lawful, is it right, to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”*

What if Jesus says, *“yes, it is lawful?”* Well, then he’ll have the Romans and the collaborators on his side. But every zealot, every patriotic Jew in the land would be set against him.

On the other hand, if Jesus says, *“No, it isn’t lawful. We shouldn’t pay this tax,”* well then he’ll get the zealots and the patriots on his side, but he’ll have the Romans and the collaborators as his opponents. Either way, whether he says *“yes”* or *“no”*, he’ll have some major political and religious faction in opposition to him. It’s a classic “damned-if-you-do, “damned- if-you-don’t” dilemma.

Makes me think of reporters posing “gotcha” questions to politicians — trying to trap them, and trip them up. If they say “yes,” well then this constituency opposes them. If they say “no,” then that constituency opposes them. And this is the situation in which Jesus finds himself. The Pharisees and Herodians are not honestly looking for an answer. They are just trying to trap him, because want to get rid of him.

And how does Jesus respond? *“Show me the money for the tax.”* They give him a Roman coin, and he says to them, *“whose likeness or image is this, and whose inscription?”* They answer, *“Caesar’s.”* And so, he responds, *“Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. . .and to God the things that are God’s.”*

Now, our first reaction is to applaud Jesus’ cleverness. From our vantage point, we can cheer him for his escape from this trap set for him. Jesus is quick on his feet. He’s a good thinker, a good debater. But our Lord is much more than merely clever. Something powerful and profound is being communicated in his response.

Jesus’ words here have inspired much commentary down through the years, on the question of the proper relationship between religion and politics — between church and state — what is owed to Caesar, and what is owed to God. On the surface, Jesus’ response seems to favor some kind of sharp demarcation between religion and politics. Render to Caesar what belongs to him, and then on the other side of the divide render to God what belongs to God. It seems to be a sharp separation — to use our language — a separation between church and state. But there is more to it than that.

Jesus is indeed indicating that Caesar — which is to say, government, politics, the secular authorities — they have their legitimate realm, duty and responsibility. We live in a world of politics, economics, social relations — and we Christians don’t back off from that world, we don’t refuse to cooperate with it. We participate in public life, and we acknowledge its legitimacy. There are people who are very skilled and gifted in these particular areas — it’s their vocation. And of course, in a democracy like ours, we all have the vocation of being a good citizen, of being an informed voter.

But now listen again to Christ’s words: *“Render to Caesar the things that are ‘Caesar’s.”* Okay. *“And to God the things that are God’s.”*

Well, brothers and sisters, what belongs to God? **Everything!** Absolutely everything — and everyone — belongs to God! The psalmist says, “*The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof!*” (Ps 24:1)

Jesus says “*Show me that coin. Whose image is on it?*” Well it’s Caesar’s image. Then give that coin to Caesar. But what is the further implication? Well, everybody — including Caesar, including the government — is stamped with **God’s image**. Everything in the universe from angels to atoms, bear the image of God.

And because of that, we can’t draw a sharp line of separation between religion and politics — here’s religion on one side, and here’s politics on the other. It can’t work that way, not if God is truly God and Lord over all.

Government has its own legitimacy, but it’s under the aegis of, and related to, the purposes of God. This becomes very clear in today’s First Reading. The prophet Isaiah is talking about Cyrus, the king of the Persians, who knew nothing of the Lord. Cyrus knew nothing of the God of Israel. And yet, Isaiah says, Cyrus was a **servant** of God. Whether he knew it or not, Cyrus operated according to God’s purposes, God’s designs. His political decisions about the Jews — allowing them to return to their homeland — they were under the aegis of God’s wisdom and providence.

And that’s important for us to bear in mind, because we live in a country and in a culture, which in many ways has tried to privatize religious faith. Much of the dominant culture says to the Church — to Christians — we will tolerate you as long as you keep your faith to yourself. As long as religion and faith are private matters, entertained in your heart, whispered among yourselves, but don’t bring them out into public.

In his much-discussed book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, Yale professor Stephen Carter wrote:

*In a sensible zeal to keep religion from dominating our politics, we have created a political and legal culture that presses the religiously faithful to be other than themselves, to act...as though their faith does not matter to them.”*

*To treat “religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant.”*

*To imply “that there is something wrong with religious devotion.”* (pp. 3-6)

Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Government has its legitimate role. But Caesar, the government, social life, politics, economics — it all ultimately belongs to God. And therefore all of it — for the Christian — should to be informed by strong, clear, religious principles. When we go to the ballot box, when we elect officials, we should be informed by strong, clear, Christian values. And that doesn’t mean we always agree. But our frame of reference is the same. How do I best serve God? How do I best serve my neighbor?

Now this is certainly not to say that clergy should be running the government. Certainly not. And it is definitely not a call for any kind of

theocracy. No. Instead it's simply a call for Christians to live out their faith in *all* aspects of their lives.

Render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Yes. But never forget to render unto God, what is God's.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.