

Homily for 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Could you choose a more challenging Gospel than the one we just heard? It is foolish to think that Jesus' statement about render to Caesar and to God is the Bible's version of the separation of Church and State. This Gospel is not that simplistic. It calls us to carefully examine what is really going on.

The question posed to Jesus about taxes is obviously a trick. If Jesus agrees with taxes then he alienates himself from his poor Jewish countrymen who are suffering under the Roman Tax. If Jesus disagrees with the tax then He will be seen as someone who fosters sedition. No easy way out of this.

So first Jesus asks for a coin. He is about to reveal the hypocrisy of those questioning Him. The coin that is used for paying the taxes is a special coin that contains the image of Caesar. So hated was this coin, that Jews refused to carry it. When the Pharisees reached into their pocket and pulled out the coin, everyone surrounding them was shocked. Here are people who publicly preach against the tax and yet who carry the hated coin in their pocket. Who are they kidding? They have fallen into the trap of their own two-faced approach to Christ.

Jesus stares at them, looks at the coin and then comes out with his famous “render to Caesar” statement. But the statement is more than the words. The statement is profound. It is saying: render to Caesar those things which are marked with Caesar’s image...and then render to God those things marked with God’s image. The coins bearing Caesar’s image belong to Caesar; human beings, bearing God’s image belong to God.

It is the prophet Isaiah who reminds us that that we are marked with God’s image. Isaiah reminds us what God taught us way back in Genesis that we are made in the image and likeness of God. In Isaiah, the Word of God proclaims: “See, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hands.” And because we are inscribed on the palm of God’s hands, because we are marked by God, we are all brothers and sisters. We are all loved by God. We are one...like it or not. We do not have the right to stand above or below anyone. God calls us to respect and honor each other. This is what we owe God.

Taxes have always been a hated thing. We live our lives surrounded by taxes: federal, state, city; sale taxes...taxes on fuel, hotel rooms, hunting and fishing...and even “sin taxes” on liquor and cigarettes. Jesus words have nothing to do with taxes. Instead they have everything to do with how we live our lives.

We can give Caesar his due. We can understand the role of government in our lives. But when government calls us to overlook what is due to God, then we have cause to pause and consider how we should act. When government forgets that we are all children of God and asks us to overlook the dignity of being marked by God, when law carelessly pushes aside the sacredness of life as the great gift from God...then our allegiance to Caesar is in conflict to our allegiance to God.

Difficult words to live by? Without a doubt. But today's Gospel reminds each one of us that while government has a rightful and just place in our lives it can never cause us to fail to respect the profound truth that each and every one of us is marked by God and therefore belong to God and not to government.