

Trinity 23

I take as my text today from the Gospel passage of St. Matthew:

Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

The last Sunday of October, we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King, focusing on the truth that Jesus Christ is our Heavenly or Spiritual King and, indeed, is King of all creation. We, as Christians, are His subjects and, as loyal subjects, pledge our allegiance to Him. We offer ourselves to Him, and the first-fruits of our labors. He is the source of our very being: the source of all Goodness. He is all Powerful, all Knowing, and all Loving.

Then, On November 1st, we celebrated the Feast of All Saints, focusing on the inclusiveness, the universality of the Communion of the Saints, both the living, and those who have entered the larger life: people from many lands, different languages, coming together as one flock to raise the triumphal chorus declaring that salvation belongs to God.

As I have said a number of times, we human beings have one foot in the physical world, and the other in the spiritual world, and in today's Gospel, we find the perfect balance between the earthly and the heavenly, and the confirmation of our obligations as human beings possessing both worldly and spiritual natures.

Perhaps, we should first put what Jesus said into the context of that moment in time:

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's;
and unto God the things that are God's.

Confronting Jesus were two opposing parties which had joined together in an effort to entrap Jesus with His own words.

We have the Pharisees on one hand, who were vehemently against any support of a foreign government, in this case Rome. God was their King, and support of any government or its ruler was paramount to heresy. The Pharisees were the supreme orthodox party.

On the other hand were the Herodians, a party that grew out of supporters of Herod, king of Galilee. Herod, thought to be a Sadducee, had been appointed by the Romans. For the Herodians, Herod's appointment was legitimate because, in their opinion, involuntary submission to a foreign power was sanctioned under the Law of Moses.

The question raised: is it lawful, or is it not lawful to pay tribute to Rome?

Now, there were three taxes that the Roman government exacted from the people:

The ground tax that required one-tenth of the grain, and one-fifth of the oil and wine produced be paid to Rome; it was paid partly in-kind, and partly in money;

The income tax that was one per cent of a person's income; and

There was a poll tax that had to be paid by every male 14 to 65, and every female 12 to 65, and amounted to one denarius, and was the equivalent to the usual day's wage.

The denarius is what Jesus called the tribute coin. On the coin was a likeness of the king or ruler, in this case, most likely the bust of Caesar Augustus.

It was customary in that period that a king, as soon as he ascended the throne, would strike his own coinage, and the coinage was held to be the property of that king.

With their question, the Pharisees had set up a real dilemma for Jesus. In their frame of reference, the Pharisees and Herodians conceived of only two possible answers.

If Jesus responded that it was unlawful to pay the tax, then they could report Him to the Roman authorities as a seditious person, and, undoubtedly, Jesus would be arrested.

If Jesus responded that it was lawful to pay the tax, then He would be discredited on at least two accounts.

First, He would be discredited because the people resented paying the tax, simply because they resented any form of taxation, not unlike people today.

Second, though, is that He would be promoting an insult to God.

The Jewish nation was a theocracy, and their only king was God. To pay taxes to an earthly king, in particular to a foreign king, was an insult to God.

In their minds, the Pharisees were certain they had finally entrapped Jesus, for how other could He answer than “yes” or “no”.

As usual, the Pharisees had underestimated the wisdom of Jesus. Asking to see the coin struck with the image of Caesar, Jesus gave the unexpected answer:

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

The Pharisees and Herodians were dumbfounded. Never had they imagined such an answer. They were certain they had set the perfect trap.

If we were to paraphrase what Jesus said to them, it would be something like this:

“Whose image is on the coin? If it has Caesar's head on it, then it must be his coin; so if it belongs to Caesar, then give it back. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.”

With that answer, Jesus laid down an essential principle: the dual citizenship of a Christian.

A Christian is a citizen of the country where he lives, and he is a citizen of heaven.

This dual citizenship brings with it dual responsibilities.

In God's plan, government has a purpose: it provides law and order; it provides services and facilities; it provides for the welfare of its citizens. While not all government is good, at the same time, we can also say that not all government is bad.

As Christians, we have a moral responsibility, and an obligation of citizenship, to participate in the administration of our own government; failure to do so can produce dire consequences, as history has shown.

Even in the time of the early Church, Christians had a duty to Caesar in return for the privileges Roman rule brought them.

Yet, it must not be overlooked that as Christians, we are also citizens of heaven, and have a responsibility to God. That responsibility to God overshadows our involvement in our earthly government, in that we cannot condone that which goes against our religious convictions. We must resist, if necessary, that which is against the will of God, and take no part in it. We must stand up for what is right in the sight of God, and stand against what is wrong in His sight.

A real test of our consciences but also a permanent truth that Jesus has set down: we are at the same time to be both good citizens of our country, and good citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The loyalty we declare to our country is not the same as the loyalty we declare to our Lord and Saviour. One is within the physical realm of here and now; the other is in the spiritual realm and encompasses all of eternity.

We, as Christians, exercise the duties expected of us in a physical world. Indeed, we are obligated to do so out of moral conscience. Our participation in the governing of our earthly affairs is no less important than our participation in the governing of our spiritual affairs.

In each, we cannot be bystanders. We must be active participants.

We render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's, not passively but actively, as history has shown us through the lives of the Saints.

Indeed, our love and devotion to God does not excuse us of our human responsibilities and obligations as Jesus has pointed out. More to the point, it requires us to hold responsible the "Caesars" whose power and authority ultimately come from God, while at the same time dedicating ourselves, our souls and bodies to our Creator and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

No one has ever claimed that being a Christian was an easy way. The consequences of our individual failures, especially our corporate failures, can be felt and seen, felt both here on earth and eternally in heaven.

As citizens of our own country, we exercise our moral responsibilities in a world that is hostile to God. We face daily challenges to our own morality and sense of what is good and bad. We walk a tight rope, and our balance is dependent upon our consciences.

As citizens of Heaven, our spiritual allegiance is to our Heavenly King, to Jesus Christ, to whom we owe everything.

We give to our heavenly King, to Him alone, all honor and praise, and, more importantly, our souls and bodies as living gifts.

While we pay the tribute money to Caesar with reluctance, while we pay to Caesar what is Caesar's, we at the same time skimp on returning to God what is God's, even the first-fruits of our labors, not to mention our love.

So then, what is the tribute that we pay to God? The simple answer is: everything! He has created everything; all creation has His stamp on it, even we are stamped with His Likeness.

More especially, in the realm of God, when we consider his True Nature, the real answer should be: our love; our devotion; our hearts, souls, and minds. The more of ourselves that we return to Him, the more He will give to us in return.