

20 Pentecost, Proper 24, Yr. A  
October 18, 2020  
Matthew 22:15-22

Well, just as we are all getting totally worn out by politics and political campaigns, up comes this Gospel with its question to Jesus about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not. Matthew makes it pretty clear that the Herodians and the Pharisees weren't really looking for an answer; instead he tells us that they were trying to "entrap" Jesus. I'm guessing Jesus would have been tipped off from the beginning when these two groups came together, because ordinarily they were like gasoline and matches – they were enemies. The Herodians, supporters of King Herod, who was a puppet of the Romans, would have been totally in support of paying taxes to Rome. The Pharisees, however, hated Rome and the Roman occupation. They would also have been offended by the image on the coin that gets handed to Jesus, which has Tiberius on one side and an inscription to his divinity on the other. But you'll remember the old saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" and that's what's going on here. They have something in common. They both want to get rid of Jesus. So they think they've come up with the perfect question. TELL US, THEN, WHAT YOU THINK. IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR, OR NOT? Seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Paying taxes. Nobody really likes to do that; we all complain about it. But Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that taxes

are the price we pay for civilization. I remember being at a listening session in Sturgeon Bay a couple of years ago when an elderly man spoke up and said that, instead of complaining, we should recognize that paying taxes is a privilege.

But the real issue here isn't paying taxes, it's catching Jesus. If he says it's unlawful to pay the tax, he gives the Romans an excuse to accuse him of sedition. If he says the Jews should pay the tax, he runs the risk of playing into Jewish anger and resentment and thus discrediting his teaching. So, in a sentence that one commentator has called the best NON-

ANSWER EVER RECORDED, Jesus looks at the coin with Caesar's image and tells them to GIVE TO THE EMPEROR THE THINGS THAT ARE THE EMPEROR'S AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S.

Let's go back to the coin for a minute. (First, it's interesting to note, as some commentators do, that Jesus doesn't give it back.) In ancient times, coinage was the sign of kingship. When a king came to power, he struck his own coinage. So, while local coins had nothing on them, these coins would have had the image of the emperor and the words, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great high priest." It's got his head, his IMAGE, therefore it belongs to him. Treat it accordingly. But these were religious Jews listening to Jesus, so talk of images would no doubt have reminded them of Genesis, where God made humans in HIS IMAGE – so then, the

follow-up statement, give to God what belongs to God, would have reminded them that every human being belongs to God and their welfare was God's concern.

What if this conversation hadn't been a trap, but an honest discussion about the relationship between the religious and secular authorities, or in today's language, between church and state? What do you think Jesus would have said? Heaven know that, embroiled as we are in that topic today, some guidance would be welcome! What does the church have to say in the public square? How does the Gospel interface with politics?

I remember an ethics professor in seminary pointing out that politics is about making policy and that politics was a sacred vocation. That politicians were those people charged with setting the country's policies, charged with articulating a vision for the country and then further charged with figuring out a way to make that vision a reality. In this broad sense, Jesus was concerned with politics, because he was primarily interested in bringing about the Kingdom of God, that state of affairs where everyone could flourish. That was his vision.

As followers of Christ, does his body, the Church, have anything to say about politics? I would say that Jesus did that, over and over again, by saying that our politics need to reflect our hope and trust in God's kingdom. So, for instance, in Matthew 25, Jesus says that what matters is whether we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, took care of the vulnerable. Those are policy questions.

In his book, *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis said this:

“The Biblical vision is there and merely awaits us. When we move toward our prophetic and democratic visions, slaveries are ended, civil rights achieved, freedom established, compassion implemented, justice advanced, human rights defended and peace made. When we neglect the vision, greed triumphs, selfishness erodes our common life, our divisions increase, our weapons expand and our conflicts proliferate.”

In 1951, the American theologian, Richard Neibuhr, wrote a book, *Christ and Culture*. In it, he analyzed the various ways we try to answer that Emperor/God question. On one extreme, there are those who would say that it's simply the culture AGAINST God and the Christian must choose God and leave the culture behind. The early monastics would fall into this group. They saw the world as hopeless and turned their backs on the whole sorry mess.

That's one extreme. On the other end are those people who think that Christ and THEIR culture, whatever it is, are one and the same. We see that today in some forms of Christian nationalism. But the best example would be the Nazis who went so far as to impose their swastikas over the cross and who managed to coopt most of the church into thinking that its policies and vision were the same as those of the church. No nation is exempt from this, however. I mentioned Christian nationalism today, but you may remember that Abraham Lincoln, during the Civil

War, reminded his countrymen that their task wasn't to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for all their national policies and practices – saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather, Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly whether WE are on GOD'S side.

How do we know we're on God's side? For that, the vision of the Old Testament prophets, as well as Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, are just as relevant today as they ever were. It's been suggested that whenever we deal with these political, policy-making questions, we ask ourselves how the most vulnerable among us are doing. Often that question is phrased around children: HOW ARE THE KIDS DOING? Because that question, what happens to the kids, ours and everybody else's, illuminates all the other social, economic and policy questions. This would be a middle view in the Christ/Culture spectrum – the view that says that Christ, and by extension, we Christians, can TRANSFORM culture. Our faith matters. How we act, how we vote – how we participate in our democracy – all of that should reflect our Christian understanding.

Going back to the question about the kids. I'm guessing that for most of us here all our kids are doing fine. But the question includes ALL kids, all kids everywhere. If we look at that question, we get a different answer: what about the kids that are separated from the parents at the border and living in cages? What about the kids who are going to bed hungry in this the richest country in the world? What about

the kids who are held back because of an inferior education because of poorly funded schools? One of my daughters was telling me that when the schools went online, many kids were left further behind because they didn't have online access. And all of that is more or less under our noses. What about kids in other parts of the world?

It'd like to end with the story that appeared in the most recent Economist. It was an obituary for Swami Agnivesh. He had been a lawyer and a lecturer in management studies. But at the age of 30 he left it all behind and became a monk - but not one that left the world behind. Instead, he went to live in some of the worst places in India: the stone quarries, the carpet workshops, the silk factories. What he discovered in those places was indentured servitude, with children as young as 4 or 5 working off debts their parents could never repay. There were 15 million of these kids who were under 14. There were laws against this, but they were not enforced. So combining religious vision and political skill, Agnivesh formed unions, pushed for enforcement of the existing laws, raised money to buy freedom of as many workers as possible. He acted as a peacemaker between Hindus and Muslims. All this made him unpopular with the authorities. Sound familiar? Sounds like Jesus! Amen.