

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time *Matthew 22:15-21*

In the ancient Mediterranean culture, no question is neutral. It is always intended and perceived as a challenge to one's honor.

Today's gospel portrays Jesus once again as a master of the cultural game of challenge and riposte. So far Jesus has been fencing with the chief priests and elders. Now the Pharisees and Herodians launch an attack on him. **Matthew's editorial comment leaves no doubt about their intentions:** the Pharisees intend to entrap Jesus by what he says (22:15). They enlist the Herodians in their plot.

The questioners begin with flattery to take Jesus off guard, and then the Pharisees and the Herodian's bring up the issue of paying taxes to the Emperor, and Jesus uttered the famous line ***"render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."***

So what does this say about the role of government in our lives? What do we owe to the state?

Despite their flattering words, they were trying to trap him, to force him into a no-win situation. **Consider the circumstances.** Living under the iron boot of a brutal empire, patriotic Jews longed to throw off the yoke of the pagan tyrants. They prayed for an anointed king who would free them from the Romans as David had freed them from the Philistines.

Anyone advocating collaboration with the invaders could not possibly be the hoped-for Messiah. No, he would appear as a traitor.

But on the other hand, anyone preaching resistance to Rome would be branded an enemy of the Empire and would wind up suspended from a cross.

IT SEEMS TO BE A No-Win Situation.

So the Pharisees decided to put Jesus on the spot in front of the crowd to dishonor and discredit him. They asked him a question they believe is bound to get him into trouble one way or the other: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?”

First of all, Jesus teaches us how to deal with a bogus theological question. He unmasks it for what it is, an effort to trip him up rather than an inquiry proceeding from a sincere desire to know the truth. And then, rather than letting himself be controlled and put on the spot, he takes charge of the conversation and puts the Pharisees on the spot.

He answers a question with a question. “Whose head is on that coin that you have in your pocket, the coin that you are using to pay for the temporal necessities of life?” “Caesar’s.” Now who is it that has a Roman coin in their possession and whom are you associating with is what the crowd hears Jesus point out in the question.

Next Jesus says something that makes them think, much like he did with the men eager to stone the woman caught in adultery (John 8). “Then render to Caesar what is Caesar, but give to God what is God’s.” (Mat 22:15-21).

Clearly, Jesus wins the battle. He transforms an attempt to make him look bad into a teaching moment. A moment now on the Record for all time, his response provides people from every age with some very important food for thought.

Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s

Government is a fact of life. Rulers, laws, police, taxes. What should a worshiper of God make of it?

One thing Jesus points out to the Pharisees is that they participate in this societal infrastructure. They don’t live on a deserted island. Rather, they depend on the imperial system for everything from the food in the marketplace to protection from thieves.

One rural community in the USA not so long ago celebrated their independence and freedom from local taxes after seceding from the nearby township. A few days later, they were unpleasantly surprised when the town trash trucks didn't show up.

Jesus says we can't have it both ways—if we benefit from secular society, we need to support the infrastructure of society. This can take the form of taxes, military service, jury duty, and informed, conscientious voting.

On the other hand, Jesus says that we need to give to God what is God's. This is the real punch line of the story. For God has given us everything. **In fact, it is he who raises up** kings and nations and through them provides for us.

The Lord used the Babylonians to punish the stubborn disobedience of the kingdom of Judah. **But when the time of exile was completed**, God used the pagan Persian king, Cyrus, to break the stranglehold of Babylon and allow the Chosen People to return home. Surprisingly, the prophet Isaiah even calls this unbeliever the messiah or anointed one! (Is 45:1-6)

But there are also times when rulers overstep their authority. Sometimes, they demand to be worshiped, like Caesar did.

Other times they attack human dignity by, violating natural law which demands that innocent human life be protected from the moment of its creation. Life as God has created it must be respected and protected. These are times when Christians have a duty boldly to insist that.

Yes, Leaders are owed their due, but we cannot and stand by and silently watch them step on God's toes no matter who they are. Because to stand by and silently do nothing is to be in the same exact standing and in agreement with the evil that is being propagated. You can't bless what is sinful.

And that, my brothers and sisters, was the man who was cast out of last week's Gospel reading as he was not wearing the proper clothing for the banquet, the clothing that the King provided for the guests, Truth Honor and Righteousness.

Deacon Hicks