

Homily on Matt 22:15-22

October 20, 2017

Intro: In Matthew's gospel Jesus continues to be attacked by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, whose hostility will soon get him condemned to death by the Romans. To understand today's gospel you have to know the players. The Sadducees of next Sunday's gospel were the chief priests and their hangers-on, who profited from Roman political and financial support of the temple hierarchy. They would be in favor of paying taxes to Rome. The Herodians were adherents of Herod Antipas, who was appointed by Rome to rule in Samaria and Galilee. They, too, would be in favor of paying taxes to Rome. The Pharisees, as the spiritual leaders of the people, generally disapproved of Roman domination, but they were realists, so they were ambivalent about the tax. Finally, on the left were the Zealots, ultra-nationalists against any domination by or collaboration with Rome and so opposed the tax.

Matt: So this was the trap of the Pharisees and Herodians: If Jesus says they should pay the tax, he alienates the Zealots and a large percentage of Jews squeezed to death by the tax. If he says they shouldn't pay the tax, he alienates Rome and the wealthy and powerful who collaborate with Rome and could get him put to death.

They begin with a phony flattery of Jesus as an authentic teacher; it is phony because they had not come to learn from the teacher, but to trap him. But Jesus sees through their malice and, in a stroke of genius, avoids their trap. He asks for the coin with which they paid the tax. Now the Roman coin of the tax was the denarius. On that coin was an image of the emperor Tiberius Caesar, and on the reverse side was the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, august Son of the Divine Augustus, high priest." So if these Jews had the coin, they were carrying around a graven image of the divine son of a Roman god, which would be a double sin against the first commandment.

So they rummaged around (probably in the Herodians' pockets) and came up with a denarius to give him. Jesus then asked them, whose inscription and image this was. They have to confess their sin---it is the image of the divine Caesar. Now the Romans were very clear that Roman coinage belonged to Rome; no one else had the right to issue Roman coins. So Jesus says, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar," but then he adds, "And [give] to God what belongs to God." By making this distinction he mollifies the nationalists, who think that all taxes belong to God's people, the Jews, and the Sadducees, who think Jews ought to pay taxes to Caesar. Once again Jesus has confounded his enemies, who leave in defeat.

What does this celebrated expression mean for us today?

First, be careful: Jesus is not saying that some things belong to God and other things belong to civil authorities. In Jesus' eyes, all things belong to God. When the early Christians paid taxes to Rome they did so while thinking that all authority comes from God (Rom 13), and so paying taxes to Caesar is giving back to God. When the Jews paid the tax they supported the Roman army which guaranteed the Pax Romana, the Roman aqueducts which brought water to the city, the Roman roads which the Jews and Jesus himself trod. When you pay taxes you are providing for the structures and the sustenance that God wants for his people. You are giving to God.

Second, Jesus leaves it open what belongs to God directly and what belongs to God indirectly, through civil authorities. That is for each of to weigh in our own conscience according to the facts at our disposal.

Third, the Catholic tradition has always maintained that sometimes legitimate rulers (and even more illegiti-

mate ones) create unjust laws. Christians are to resist and even disobey those unjust laws. We now acknowledge that it was right for Rosa Parks to resist Jim Crow laws by refusing to give up to a white man her bus seat in the colored section. It was right for some Christians to refuse to be drafted for what they perceived to be an unjust war in Vietnam. Archbishop Hunthausen of Seattle refused to pay the half of his taxes that went to support the production of what he perceived to be immoral armaments. In those cases, people were giving to God what belonged to God---service of just laws and just institutions.

This can apply to gestures so trivial as refusing to stand for the national anthem. There will always be disagreements about the morality of many political choices. Some of those choices today are quite clear contradictions of Jesus' directives and values. Jesus could not give clear directives about everything in the 21st century, nor can our Church. But sometimes our Pope and bishops can discern Jesus' command for us, as when they declared the war in Iraq to be an unjust war. The genius of this gospel is that it reminds us that our first priority is not to our country but to our God. That is good news not only for us but for our whole world.