

DUAL CITIZENSHIP

Isaiah 45. 1-7

1 Thessalonians 1. 1-10

Matthew 22. 15-22

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ This saying is one of the most famous instructions of our Lord. It is memorable, pithy and profound. Jesus said it in a dangerous, dramatic moment, in response to a test that was meant by his enemies to catch and discredit him. In pronouncing this statement, Christ broke the trap that was set for him and blazed a trail that Christians have attempted to follow ever since.

The episode recounted in today’s gospel passage is just one of a series of attempts by our Lord’s opponents to trap him in his words. In St Matthew’s narrative, the episode occurs between Palm Sunday and Jesus’s crucifixion. The trap is prepared by the Pharisees and the Herodians, who have taken counsel together. These adversaries form an unstable alliance, united only by their opposition to Christ.

As you will remember, the Pharisees were strict and particular orthodox Jews. On some major points, our Lord shared their orthodoxy; for example, concerning the resurrection of the dead. But he criticised their legalistic spirit which appeared to ‘major in the minors’, picking nits and ignoring the weightier matters of justice and mercy. By contrast to the Pharisees, we know next to nothing about the Herodians, except that they supported the puppet monarchy of Herod the Great and his sons.

And so these two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, whose religious politics were very different, came up with today’s question for Jesus concerning the payment

of taxes to the emperor. They begin with flattery, saying that they know that Christ is no respecter of persons, but teaches the way of God in truth. ‘Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’

Shared antipathy against our Lord here made for strange allies. For the most part, the Pharisees wished for Jewish freedom from Rome. For them, the tax was an oppressive reminder of their subjugation. Jewish Zealots had even led revolts against just such a tax. On the other hand, the Herodians supported the pro-Roman reigning family of Herod and the working relationship it had with the Roman governor on a number of matters, including the operation of the Jerusalem Temple. The trap set by these two groups put Jesus into a difficult position: either he would alienate a major part of the devout population led by the Pharisees, or lay himself open to the charge of treason by the Herodians.

Christ was aware, of course, of the alliance and their malice. ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?’ he responded. ‘Show me the coin used for the tax.’ The coin brought forth would have been Roman. It was the denarius, a silver coin which would have represented a regular day’s wage; and it would have had the inscription, ‘Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus’,¹ on one side, and ‘Pontifex Maximus’, or ‘high priest’ on the other.

Note the irony of the situation in which our Lord finds himself. Here he is, the Son of the living God, sitting in the Temple, his Father’s house; and he is holding a coin engraved with the face of a man who lives far away in Rome, but who claims to be who our Lord is, the Son of God. An officer of the Roman state is claiming to be the son of God, and here the true Son of God is being pushed to answer a question about the legality of paying taxes.²

¹ In abbreviated Latin : Ti[berivs] Caesar Divi Avg[vsti] F[ilivs] Avgvstvs.

² The tax in question was the census tax. For it, the Jews received the benefit of government by their Roman overlords. Augustus had started the tax at the time Jesus was born, a little more than thirty years before.

Jesus did not give a flat answer, 'yes' or 'no', to the lawfulness of paying taxes to the emperor. Rather, he asked the Pharisees and Herodians whose image was stamped into the coin. 'The emperor's', they had to reply. Then Christ said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

While this answer amazed our Lord's opponents, it had still more profound implications. Nothing was said overtly, but another significant image underlay the confrontation that centred on the image engraved on the Roman coin; and that is the image of God, which is stamped on the human soul. Whilst it is true that Caesar, or the State, creates the currency and its laws, God has created humankind in his image. In the words of the book of Genesis, 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (1. 27).

The truth is that we believers are, in fact, dual citizens. The great St Augustine, echoing the teaching of St Paul,³ taught that we are citizens of the City of God and that we are pilgrims passing through the city of man. The two citizenships are not separated from each other in sealed compartments. They are distinct, but they influence and impinge upon each other. We are called to be good, even the best, citizens of the city of man as we go on our way through it. We are called not only to pay taxes and to obey laws, but also to work for higher standards of justice and good order in the State. We are especially called to look out for the poor, the sick, the weak and the helpless. We are called to preserve and improve the city of man in such ways as we can by our prayers, our witness and our actions.

But at the end of the day, the things of God matter the most by far. Whatever the state of the economy, whatever the political season and climate, whatever the issues

³ Cf. Eph 2. 19; Ph 3. 20; Heb 13. 14; Rev 21. 2.

in the news, each of us has, today and every day, an immortal soul that is called to make choices that count for eternity.

This requires rendering to God the things that are his, beginning and ending first and foremost with our soul and its God-given free will. Jesus's gospel stands before us to be embraced, today. You and I have sins for which we need to repent. We have virtues to acquire. We have duties to fulfil. We have people, places, things and events to encounter with grace. We have trials and tests to face. But this is the day which the Lord hath made; and we are to rejoice and be glad in it. Let us render to God the things that are his.⁴

As we hear Christ ask his challengers in today's gospel, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' let us think not only of the emperor's stamp on the coin, but of God's image in our immortal souls. And let us dedicate ourselves as followers of our Lord and citizens of his Kingdom. By doing so, and by putting that Kingdom first, we will be the emperor's best friends, whether he knows it or not.

Amen.

⁴ This incident with the Pharisees and Herodians illustrates the truth that, with our Lord, there is no middle ground: one either hates Jesus, or one acknowledges his authority. Most of us start out in the middle, with a sort of distant appreciation of Christ that does not, unfortunately, make a lot of difference in our lives. But as we move along, we do not stay at a distance. In each human life, we are either moving closer to our Lord (which is to acknowledge his authority and to accept his love) or we are moving away (which is, in the end, to hate him and desire his destruction). One cannot be neutral about Jesus. It is significant that, at the end of this encounter, the Pharisees and Herodians leave Christ and go their own way.