

God and Caesar

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

October 18, 2020

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-13

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus.” This inscription appears on the coin which Jesus holds up to the disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians. The inscription means, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” Tiberius was the Roman emperor from AD 14-37. The coin is a reminder that authority and divine power reside with the Roman rulers of Judea.

Our gospel plunges us deep into political and religious waters, where the currents of malice and jealousy swirl around Jesus. Today's passage describes the occasion when disciples of the Pharisees visit Jesus in order to entrap him. The seriousness of the situation is highlighted by the fact that accompanying the Pharisees are the Herodians, supporters of the dynasty begun by Herod the Great, and continued by his son King Herod Antipas.

This story is much beloved for the wit and decisiveness of Jesus' response to his adversaries. We will come to that encounter in a moment. This year we have been listening to the gospel of Matthew, and over the past few weeks the readings have been focusing on the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day. By shining a light on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, Jesus poses a threat to the existing order. Unable to successfully refute him in argument, Jesus' enemies instead plan to silence him by having him arrested for blasphemy or treason.

Before we come to that encounter, there is one question we should ask, which is, what did the common people think of Jesus? I think we can hear their voices in the words of flattery the disciples of the Pharisees utter in an attempt to put Jesus off his guard. Hearing secondhand the voices of the common people provide us with a neat thumbnail sketch of Jesus the man. This is what they said: Jesus is sincere. He teaches God in accordance with the truth. He shows deference to no one. He does not regard people with partiality. Now when the disciples of the Pharisees say these things, they don't believe a word of it. For us, however, it's a revealing glimpse into the way our Savior was viewed by others. It explains why he was always an outsider, never favoring one person over another, nor needing to seek favor himself. I imagine many poor people are the same.

Let us return to our story. After the words of flattery, we come to the question the Pharisees put to Jesus. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” This is what is known as a loaded question. The word “lawful” applies to the Hebraic Law, the Law given by God to Moses and passed on to the people of Israel. It's the Law which regulates every sphere of Jewish life. Adherence to the Law is equivalent to faithfulness to God; anything which opposes the Law is, *ipso facto*, in opposition to God.

But there is another law to consider: the Roman law. In the year AD 6 a law was introduced in Judea requiring men and women, including slaves, to pay every year a poll tax of one denarius - the equivalent of a day's wages - to the emperor. This tax was the cause of division within Jewish society - some, including the Pharisees and the Herodians - paid the tax to

keep the peace, but others, such as the zealots, saw the tax as an example of imperial overreach and hence opposed it. Where does Jesus stand on the matter? That's what his enemies want to know.

Context is everything. In the context, say, of a discussion among rabbis, this question could be debated and different points of view could be held so long as there was a genuine effort to reach the truth. Or it's like a question on a law school exam paper - you have twenty minutes to answer - please show your reasoning. In the current context however, it suddenly becomes a matter of life and death.

Let's recall that Jesus was no zealot. He did not engage in armed struggle against the Roman authorities. He never advocated for it. He never called for the Pharisees to resign or quit, but he did point out their hypocrisy, which is a constant theme in the gospel of Matthew. As the common folk realized, Jesus taught God in accordance with the truth.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians await Jesus' response to their question. Jesus asks them for a denarius, and then puts the question back to them. He asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

When you hear this reply, imagine Jesus in the crowd holding up the coin with the image of the emperor on it. The coin is a "thing" of the emperor, and actually, it's quite small in size. The coin is only metal - everyone can see it. But can God be seen? At that very moment, God was standing before them, although most didn't realize it. As Jesus stood there holding up the denarius with the image of Emperor Tiberias on it, did his enemies see them both together and suddenly realize what they were seeing? Were they struck by the fact that the words they had uttered earlier describing Jesus were not lies but were, in fact, the truth?

This is a story about the power of truth to suddenly blaze forth in our world and challenge and correct all of our assumptions and misconceptions. Like the enemies of Jesus, when you have accepted and internalized a lie for long enough it comes as a shock to have your world of illusion burn away before your eyes. Jesus' reply rendered his enemies speechless, and they left him and went away. Among those who confronted Jesus that day, I'd like to think that there was at least one person who went home and had second thoughts.

To conclude, let's remember what Jesus is calling us to. It's not to make the law our God. It's not to make the emperor, or the king our God. It certainly isn't to make money our God. What Jesus is calling us to do is to seek the truth and make it our goal. This is what God demands of us - not payment in gold, but payment in truth, and in honesty. This is the challenge of religion and of religious movements like Christianity. It's not one they always win. Like today, when truth becomes embarrassing to those in positions of authority, there is an attempt to suppress it. Failing that, you close down the source whereof it comes. That is what the authorities are attempting to do to Jesus.

Under totalitarian regimes like the Roman Empire, freedom of speech is not a right. Had Jesus said the wrong thing that day, he would have been arrested and killed. As Christians we must not turn away from telling the truth, even when it puts us in an uncomfortable position.

The alternative is to acquiesce in a lie, which then makes us harder for us to give to God the things that are God's.

Part of our calling as Christians is to discover the things that are God's. Certainly the demands of God are greater than anything else. But would we have it any other way? God has set the bar high for us. When we make our leap of faith, we reach for the truth because that is what God demands of us. Keep it close to your heart.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford