

## **The One to Whom All Things Belong** **A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (A)**

*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.' Matthew 22:21*

You just can't get the jump on Jesus! But they keep trying anyway! In this case, it's two groups that otherwise couldn't stand each other, but that equally resented Jesus, although for different reasons. The Pharisees were the religious elite, protectors of the ancient Law, viewed by the people as patriots under Roman rule. The Herodians, on the other hand, were the collaborators, clients of the puppet King Herod, hence their name. They're the ones who kept lists (by the way), and you didn't want to be on them.

After a load of false flattery (that must have made our Lord wince) they get to their question, and the point of their trap for him. Is it lawful, they ask that is, morally correct to pay taxes in support of the empire? It's a trick question, of course, a lose-lose situation for Jesus (or so they think). If he says yes, he'll be viewed as a traitor to the nation, by supporting an occupying power. If he says no, he'll be branded as a dissident, a political troublemaker. Rome took a dim view of troublemakers. Either way, they're sure they've got him!

But not so fast! To their trick question, Jesus responds with a trick answer. He tells them (in King James English this time), 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.' In saying this, he's not setting up two distinct and equally validating realms of loyalty one sacred and one secular. Rather, he's reminding them of what they (publicly observant Jews that they were) should already know that there is nothing that does not belong to God. From the commandments sent down from Sinai to the oracles of Isaiah to nearly every verse of the Psalms of David, Israel heard again and again their God, their one God, proclaim some version of the same central truth: 'I am the Lord; and there is no other.'

Complicating matters in this case is what in fact appeared on the denarius (the coin of the tribute) in Jesus' time. The image was that of the emperor, but the title imprinted on the coin was something that would have made Moses howl and all the prophets after him lose sleep! On one side it read, 'Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus' and on the reverse side, 'Pontifex Maximus' High Priest! Get out your sackcloth and ashes! Start tearing your garments now! What this meant is that every exchange of money in the Roman system every donation, every tax, every monetary offering made in the Temple was in some manner an act of idolatry. Jesus seems to want that message to sink in, which is why, I think, he asks his inquirers to take a closer look at the coin themselves, and to tell him what they see there. (I also like it that, apparently, Jesus doesn't carry any money on him!)

The implied message to them is this: You and I both know what's going on here. We both know what's expected of us under this pagan system. You may choose either to pay the tax or not to pay it. If you choose the former, you will be supporting the system; if you choose the latter, you may go to jail, or worse. The choice for us is pretty much the same, between our personal safety and our God-gifted conscience, between a civic duty and a higher law. Most of the time we may be able to navigate those distinctions. But throughout history we know that many have shown us how, at critical moments, those two things cannot be reconciled. 'Our fathers chained in prisons dark,' goes the old hymn, 'were still in heart and conscience free.' The price of faith is always high, and so it must remain.

Yet whatever way one chooses, one must live with the knowledge that all belongs to God. I think this is what Jesus is getting at. All life, all loyalty, all trust belongs to the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Claiming divine origin on a coin of currency does not make one God, even though one may possess the power in this world over life and death. What does he say to Pilate in St. John's Passion: 'You would have no power at all were it not given to you from above.'

So how should this message speak to us now, especially in this highly secular, deeply partisan, and somewhat idolatrous season that we are in? Every yard sign we see, every campaign ad we observe, every competing and contentious speech we hear, may seem to suggest something of what that imperial denarius declared if not that one candidate or another is God, but in the assertion that one person or party alone can bring to us the gifts of salvation, the grace of healing, prosperity, and peace. We do put too much of our trust in coins of the tribute. We do make idols out of our own favored plans and positions, our tribal needs. Sometimes without knowing it, while wanting only the best for ourselves and our future, we allow ourselves a loyalty that only God in Christ deserves. We look to a salvation that only God in Christ can bestow.

Perhaps we're looking in the wrong direction. In the end, perhaps Jesus is calling us more to consider the coin of our own realm, the currency of our own conviction. What is the image and title that we see imprinted on our own souls (he may be asking) the one God stamped there from our birth, from the first moment of creation? And how does that message read with regard to courage in the face of injustice, patience in the midst of adversity? From where do our wells of strength and compassion, decency and love stem if not from God? We may rightly put our trust in a leader or leaders who we feel model these same virtues; but we also know, at the same time, who is the source and the model of all virtue and all truth who is the Lord, and there is no other.

I've always wondered if Jesus was able to have some small positive effect, at least, on his inquisitors from Matthew's story today. It seems unlikely, although we are told that they leave 'amazed' at what he has taught them. Did something he say actually get through? Will they ever think about the coins in their pockets in the same way again? Or are they merely scratching their heads, trying to figure out how in the world he could have bested them once again!

Dear friends, our own amazement need not be so dubious or surprising. For we are led and loved by one who is the God and Ruler of all. The one to whom all things belong, for whom the nations yearn, and to whom all the kings of the earth (whether they like it or not) must bow and obey; the one from whom all healing and hope descends, not least of all in this troubled season. To such a one we can but render immortal tribute and grateful praise, in lives of service and sacrifice and in joy unceasing. Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon +