

Pentecost 20
Oct 22, 2017
Christ the King
Kenner

Politics & Religion

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

What do you say, let's talk about politics and religion. Dangerous, huh? Oh, yeh. That's what the Pharisees and Herodians were also thinking as they approached Jesus in today's Gospel. "Here's a question he won't be able to wiggle out of," they thought. "However Jesus answers, we'll have him."

Well, you just heard their question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" The Roman emperor, i.e., the one whose troops were occupying Israel.

They know that Jesus has been talking a lot about the kingdom of God. But he's hardly said a word we're aware of about the other kingdom, the political kingdom of kings and emperors. He's certainly had a lot to say about the religious leaders - most of it quite negative - but so far nothing about the government imposed by Caesar.

What's interesting is that the Pharisees and Herodians who are trying to trick Jesus with their question are on different ends of the political spectrum. Herodians accept Roman domination because they've allowed their man Herod to be a puppet king. But the Pharisees are opposed to any secular rule. They'd prefer a theocracy. So they assume Jesus will have to take sides, meaning one of them will win and the other lose with his answer. And others are probably listening in to hear how he'll respond.

But before answering, Jesus asks them to produce a coin. "Show me the money" he says, the Roman money used for taxation. He's already tricked

them, because no self-respecting Jew would be caught dead with Roman money in his pocket. But one of them has a coin to show him.

Then Jesus asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title" on the coin? This is very serious. Because the painting or engraving of figures was regarded as idolatrous by the Jews. Not only that, the inscription on the denarius gave Caesar the title, "Son of God." That was blasphemous!

So, Jesus says, let him have it. "But while you're at it, be sure to give to God what belongs to him."

This passage isn't about whether Christians should pay taxes or not. It's about prioritizing our allegiances. "Give to Caesar, the emperor, the things that are the emperors",. things like this fancy engraved coin which he's minted. "And to God the things that are God's," such as our love for him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And, of course don't confuse the two. So when push comes to shove, as it sometimes does, join with the apostles who said, "We should obey God rather than man."

The earliest creed of Christians was very simple. Simple and dangerous. When pledging allegiance to the emperor, folks were required to say, "Caesar is lord." By contrast, and as a matter of civil disobedience, the early Christians' creed was, "Jesus is Lord." That was treason. So you can see why they'd be persecuted and killed. Because Jesus was a challenge to political sovereignty, and still is.

We are so blessed to be living in a society in which we can call Jesus "Kyrie," Lord, and sing (as we do every weekend) "Lord have mercy," without

being rounded up, marched out of worship and executed. Which is to say there are a lot bigger issues than keeping Christ in Christmas.

The wonderful thing about living in a democracy is that we're not subject to tyrants, despots or autocrats. At least not for long. Political leaders can be changed at the ballot box. Laws can be challenged, policies can be changed, executive orders over-turned. That makes for a fertile atmosphere in which faith can grow and be active.

The problem spots we encounter now are mostly about ethical and moral issues. That's been true for a long time about abortion, even before Roe v Wade. But now it also involves immigration policies, racial tensions, gun-owner rights, globalization, minimum wage, access to medical care, and a host of other issues which divide not only the nation but also Christian from Christian.

The real problem, as I heard it described recently, is in trying to find political solutions to what are spiritual problems. Maybe that's just a fancy way of saying we can't legislate morality. Which is certainly true.

Jesus' questioners wanted to entrap him by asking if it was legal to pay taxes to the emperor. Of course it was. But Jesus' response takes them way beyond simple legalities. He makes all of us ask ourselves, "what doesn't belong to God? What do I owe him?" And that takes us into the realm of the ethical and moral.

In the burning issues of today's world we need to dig deeper than mere party allegiance and conservative or liberal inclinations, and certainly much

deeper than personal preferences and selfish advantage to let our faith inform our behavior. To ask "what would Jesus say," or even better, "what has Jesus said" about my neighbor, my personal morality, about the poor and vulnerable, about the foreigner, about how I treat my enemy. And what is my responsibility in helping this to be a more just and equitable society?

In short, what do I owe God who has placed me here at this time, in this place? And how can I reflect that in my civic activity as well, to the benefit of the empire and the glory of God?

Luther reminds us that we Christians are citizens of two kingdoms simultaneously, the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. One of them is temporary, the other eternal.

I've had the joy occasionally of worshipping in a church filled with different nationalities. It's thrilling to know that whatever our political, cultural, economic, social, racial differences, we are all one as the body of Christ. We have all been baptized into the same communion of saints, are redeemed by the death of our one redeemer who is Lord of us all.

Frankly, that will be a lot of the joy of Monday night's worship at St. Louis Cathedral, the realization that even Lutherans and Roman Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.

This God-given unity among all who call Jesus "Lord," Christians of every time and place, will be celebrated forever in heaven.

