

October 18, 2020
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
1Thess 1:1-5b
Mt 22:15-21

"...repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Every April 15th as I hold my nose and mail in my tax return I ask Jesus why He couldn't have just said "Repay to God what belongs to God" and left out the Caesar part. Unfortunately, like in many sections of Scripture, Jesus doesn't usually provide us definitive answers to the dilemmas life throws at us. He forces us to think and reason for ourselves within the context of His teachings. In paying my taxes I know I am giving money to the government to spend on programs and military involvements that I find morally repugnant. Yet, at the end of the day, we're faced with only three options:

- 1.) Pay up,
- 2.) Don't pay up, or
- 3.) Withhold some estimate of what amount of our taxes funds activities that we find objectionable.

Each of these choices carries consequences.

In the gospel today Jesus is presented with a serious dilemma: "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?". How Jesus answers the question posed to Him threatens not only the credibility of His ministry, but His very life.

So let's set the stage for what's happening in today's gospel. We know that Jesus did His teaching in Jerusalem within the Temple precincts, and that is where He is during this interchange with the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees are the religious leaders of the people, or so they fancy themselves. The fact that they team up with the Herodians to try to ensnare Jesus shows how much they hate Him, because the Herodians are loyal to Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and a Roman puppet. Herod Antipas is the son of King Herod of Holy Innocents infamy. King Herod was also a Roman puppet. The Herodians would have been in favor of paying the census tax, while the Pharisees, as religiously observant Jews, were against it. But, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

If Jesus advises payment of the tax, He loses all credibility as a Jewish teacher. If He advises folks not to pay the tax, He becomes a seditious political leader and therefore a threat to the Romans who are always quick to ruthlessly snuff out even a whiff of treason.

On the credibility issue, Jesus cleverly turns the tables. No observant Jew, especially inside the Temple precincts, would have on his or her person a Roman coin used to pay the census tax. The Roman coin, called a denarius, not only contained an image of the Emperor, but it also proclaimed him to be divine with the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus, High

Priest". Under Jewish Law, this is blasphemy. Jesus certainly carried no such coin, so He asks if someone can show Him one. When it's a Pharisee who produces the coin, it's the Pharisee, not Jesus, who is discredited as a religious hypocrite. Pharisean credibility lost; Jesus' credibility enhanced.

Jesus then goes on to avoid the treason issue by telling people to REPAY to Caesar what belongs to him. He's not telling the people to render to Caesar any Jewish shekels or any other Israeli asset, but rather to return to Caesar coins minted by Caesar. Paying shekels to Caesar would violate the Law of Moses, but returning to Caesar something made by him does not. So in one phrase "repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar", Jesus discredits the Pharisees, bolsters His own credibility,

and avoids crossing the Romans; all by never really answering the question posed! Brilliant! If only we could always be so brilliant. Facing dilemmas with wisdom, particularly moral dilemmas, is difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible.

We're all staring a moral dilemma in the face right now: Who to vote for for President of the United States. For believers in faith traditions that value life above all else, it's a particularly repugnant choice. It's like holding your nose on April 15th.

One candidate is strongly in favor of the death penalty and has been accused by many of negligent homicide because of how he has handled and continues to manage--or not manage-- the pandemic that threatens not only our way of life, but our very lives themselves. I think the statement made about the death toll to date was something like "it is what it is".

The other candidate favors genocide through abortion, and when he was in the Senate voted to allow George W. Bush to invade Iraq, a war in clear violation of our Church's definition of just warfare.

So we have two candidates who continue to demonstrate disregard for human life, yet we are asked to choose. It's a choice that forces us to decide for ourselves which evils are less evil. The only other options are to vote for some obscure 3rd party candidate or sit on the sidelines and not vote at all.

This is just one of the many incredible dilemmas life throws at us. There is only one way I know of to face them: Prayer. No matter what we decide, if we decide prayerfully, we'll be OK. I firmly believe that. But if we try to face life's dilemmas on our own, fogettaboutit. So rest assured that if you make your tough decisions in dialogue with God, you will make the right choices for you—and that's really all God wants and asks of us.

Now in the event you don't feel challenged enough already, think about this. The only part of today's gospel we've addressed so far is the "repay to Caesar part". But that's not the end of our gospel story today.

Jesus closes with a bang: "...repay to God what belongs to God".

I think this deserves a "c'mon, man! Are you kidding me?".

For me, this is an even bigger challenge than figuring out Caesar-type dilemmas.

Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle, writes this: "If something bears the imprint of Caesar then it is Caesar's...according to the same logic, if something bears the imprint of God then it must be returned to God. As Christians, we believe that we are created in God's image and likeness. Therefore, the whole of our life is imprinted with the image of God, and every blessing we have received is imprinted with the hand of God."

So today's gospel closes with a discipleship challenge, a stewardship challenge. The challenge of stewardship is to surrender all that we have and all that we are to the Lord because our entire being and all that it contains bear God's Divine imprint. God asks us to give not just what we want to give of ourselves; He asks us to give all of ourselves, because all of ourselves came from Him. The gifts the Lord has bestowed upon us are not meant just for us. They're meant to be returned to Him—repayed to Him using the parlance of today's gospel--by sharing them with the world. Not to share ourselves and our gifts with the world is to deny God's creative plan.

May God give us the will to persist in prayer when life is throwing seemingly impossible dilemmas and decisions at us. Above all, may God grant us the wisdom to understand that all we have comes from Him and all that has been given us is to be used for the greater good. May God give us the strength to put ourselves in the service of others for His greater glory, holding nothing back.