

Oct 22nd, 2017

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Paying Taxes to the Emperor

Mt 18:15-20

As Father pointed out so well last week, ... over the last few Sundays, Jesus has been seriously challenged by the Pharisees. It started when they asked Jesus, “by what authority are you doing these things” ... as Jesus had just cleansed their temple ... even overturning the money changer’s tables. To answer their question ... Jesus trapped them by asking if John the Baptist’s baptism was from heaven or not. They couldn’t answer as either way they would lose ... since the people saw John as a prophet and the Pharisees didn’t. The following week, we had the parable with the vineyard where the owner leased it to some tenants. And, they killed first the owner’s servants and then his only son. This parable challenged the Pharisees again and we hear that as a result ... the Pharisees and chief priests wanted to arrest Jesus but they couldn’t because they feared the crowds. Then, last week we had the parable of the wedding feast where Jesus challenged them again by saying all those that were invited directly didn’t come.... The invited were the chosen people (Israel) ... headed by the Pharisees.

Today we hear that next, the Pharisees went off and plotted how they would entrap Jesus. This time, they sent their disciples with extra ammunition ... the Herodians. The Herodians supported the paying of taxes and as we hear in St Mark’s Gospel ... after he thwarted their challenge on another occasion, “*The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him (Jesus) to put him to death.*” Mk 3:16

There was a great division at that time. The Pharisees, being self-satisfied and pandering to their followers, contended that the people of God were already doing enough and shouldn’t be subjected to “human laws” like paying taxes. So, they think they have Jesus trapped ... if he says yes, pay the taxes, the people will certainly go back to following the

Pharisees. If he says they shouldn't pay the taxes, it will cost Jesus his life as the Herodians will arrest him.

Today's parable must be considered in the light of all this. Jesus sees right through them and responds, "*Why are you testing me, you **hypocrites**? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.*" Jesus then asks whose image is on the coin and responds, "*Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*" The very next phrase after today's Gospel, we hear that "*they were amazed, and leaving him they went away.*" What was so amazing? That caused them to leave without further challenge.

What did Jesus really say here? I ask you: **what doesn't belong to God?** Or, what belongs to Caesar that doesn't belong to God? What is Jesus really saying here and why are they amazed? There is a lot in that short little response ... repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. Once again, Jesus has averted the trap but actually, he has done much more than avert the trap, he gave the hypocritical Pharisees ... and all of us a very important teaching that applies so much even in today's world.

What belongs to God? ... **all that is good** belongs to God! Right? True love, his creation, ... what about money? Does it belong to God? ... if it has the picture of Caesar or Lincoln or George Washington, does it belong to God? Well, is it good? Well, yes, **all that is good** belongs to God.

On the other hand, what belongs to Caesar? What is Jesus saying about giving to Caesar what is Caesar's? Origin, a great early father of the church wrote on this very verse ... that, "*the prince of the world, that is, the Devil, is called Caesar.*" He goes on saying that we cannot give all to God that is God's unless we have first given all that is not good to "**this prince ... the evil one**" ... that is, until we have cast off all wickedness.

This response by Jesus was "amazing" and puzzling and full of meaning ... so they didn't know what else to say ... how could anyone disagree?

So, what is the main lesson Jesus had here?

First, we need to eliminate sin in our lives and then we can give God all that is His. Otherwise, we are caught in our errors and do things that take us away from doing good ... from loving.

Let's consider the role of money in light of what Jesus says here. Money is not evil or bad. If someone has a ton of money, they don't possess a ton of evil, do they? No. They possess a ton of potential to do good ... Instead, it is the love of money ... putting money above our neighbor or God is clearly wrong and ... **one doesn't need a lot of money to do this**. But, yes, some people who have a ton of money because they love money and use evil means to attain it ... or get into a lifecycle or lifestyle that includes greed and selfishness and lying and swindling.

So, having our hearts aligned with God and casting off the sins of greed, selfishness, lying or cheating others allows us to be charitable and loving so we can use money or time to do God's will. Consider all the good things one can do with money if it is spent properly, or invested in places where it will help those in need, or donated to good causes. Every financial decision we make should follow Jesus words ... render unto Caesar what is evil ... for example, give our greed, selfishness, or our desire to have more than our neighbor ... away... to "Caesar" ... then we can make our choices with money and income and investments in a loving way such that they are aligned with God and His Church ... helping our neighbors especially the poor and needy.

Now this short and very important saying from Jesus applies to practically anything we do or have or attain. It is not just about money and taxes. Whatever decisions we make, we should think ... am I rendering unto evil or giving this to God? Am I being selfish or am I being charitable? It is a good little thought to live by. Render unto Caesar what is his and to God all that is good.