

GOD AND GOD ALONE – A HOMILY FOR THE 29TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

The Gospel for Sunday contains lots of interesting juxtapositions: hatred for Jesus but grudging respect, real questions vs. rhetorical ones, politics and faith, duties to Caesar and duties to God. The word “juxtaposition” comes from the Latin *juxta*, meaning “near” and *positio*, meaning “place” or “position”. Juxtaposition is the placing of two things near to each other, usually in order to see how they are similar yet different. Most often the differences are emphasized more than the similarities.

Let’s look at the juxtapositions in today’s Gospel, concentrating most of our attention on our duties to God as compared to our duties to “Caesar.”

I. The Plotting of the Peculiar Partners – The Gospel begins by describing an extremely unlikely set of “bedfellows.” The text says, ***The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians.*** A very unlikely set of allies indeed. The Pharisees hated the Herodians. It was a combination of political and racial hatred, just about as poisonous as you could get in the ancient world, yet they both agreed that this Jesus fellow had to go.

Here is an important teaching: if you’re going to be a true Christian, the world will hate you. Too many Christians think that some segment of the world will agree to live in peace with us and so we strive to forge allegiances with it. In the modern American milieu, some think that the Republicans or the Democrats are natural allies, but we really don’t fit well into either party nor any worldly “club.”

Catholicism is an “equal-opportunity offender” in its unabridged form. Issue by issue We may appeal to one political party or another on a particular issue, but on the whole we’re a nuisance: we’re pro-life, traditional family values, immigrants’ rights, and affordable housing. We both please and annoy, which

is another way of saying we don't fit neatly into the world's categories; everyone has some reason to hate us.

Welcome to Jesus' world, in which groups who seemed to agree on nothing were aligned when it came to hating Jesus.

II. The Praise that is actually a Perilous Provocation – In their opening remarks to Jesus, His enemies give Him grudging respect. They do so not to praise Him, however, but rather to provoke Him. They say, ***Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion ... Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?***

The praise is largely a pretext that is used to provoke. In effect, they think they can force a definition on Jesus: "You're 'the Man.' You're the prophet. You're the only one around here who tells the truth no matter what." Now none of these things are false and they bespeak a grudging respect for Jesus.

However, they are only using this to draw Jesus into a worldly debate that is well "below his pay grade." They want Jesus to take sides in a silly human debate over politics and worldly power. They want him to get arrested and killed over something that is not worth dying for.

Prophets die for the truth revealed by God not for who the "big cheese" should be in human affairs. They want Jesus to opine as if He were some sort of talking head on TV rather than the prophet and Lord that He is. A question of this sort is not worthy of Jesus' attention. Ask this of the local senator or mayor but leave God out of human political distinctions and camps; do not expect Him to take sides. He is beyond our distinctions and will not be confined by party lines, national boundaries, or political philosophies.

We may well contend that certain systems of government better reflect the Kingdom than others, but in the end, God cannot be reduced to being a Republican, a Democrat, or for that matter an American. He is God and He transcends our endless debates and camps. He is not a talking head; He is God.

Generally speaking, rhetorical questions are statements or arguments posed in the form of a question. If I say to you, “Are you crazy?” I’m not really looking for an answer; I’m making statement that I think you *are* crazy. This is what takes place in today’s Gospel. The questioners already have their own opinions and aren’t change their minds no matter how Jesus answers. They don’t really *want* an answer; they want something to use against Him.

If Jesus says, “Yes, pay the taxes,” it will make Him unpopular with the crowds. If He says “No, don’t pay the taxes,” He will be arrested and likely executed.

In the end, Jesus calls them what they are: hypocrites, a Greek word meaning “actor.” And that is what they are. This whole thing is an act. This is not about discovering the truth; it is about setting a trap.

But Jesus will have none of it. He will not be reduced to human distinctions and categories. The truth He proclaims transcends the passing political order and any human power struggles. He will not be drawn into choosing sides. Rather, He will apply the rule of truth evenly to all.

Jesus is reality in the face of rhetoric, perfection in the face of politics, divinity in the face of division.

III. The Protesting of their Pretext and Pretense – *Knowing their malice,* Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?” Not everyone who engages us is truly looking for an answer or for the truth. We cannot always know things, but Jesus surely could. Often, when engaged in a discussion

about the truth of the Gospel, one discovers that authentic dialogue is not actually taking place. In that case it is permissible to merely proclaim the truth firmly, clearly, and with due charity, and then end the conversation. Jesus called them on their pretense and authoritatively announced the principle with the goal of ending the conversation and sending them away to think.

IV. The Pointed Proclamation of the Principle – Jesus says, simply, and in a way that transcends worldly “all-or-nothing” scenarios, ***Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.***

Such an answer elicits in us a desire for elaboration, but in our demands for more detail, we too often seek to conceal the fact that we really know the answer. We also betray the need of the flesh to specify everything so as to control and limit its impact.

If we really need a list, we might include some of the following things we ought to do in order “repay” to Caesar:

1. Obey all just laws.
2. Pay legally assessed taxes.
3. Pray for our country and its leaders.
4. Participate in the common defense based on our abilities and state in life.
5. Take an active and informed role in the political process.
6. Engage in movements for necessary reform.
7. Contribute to the common good through work (domestic or market-based) and through the sharing of our abilities and talents with others.
8. Maintain strong family ties and raise disciplined children who are well-prepared to contribute to the common good and to the good order of society.
9. Encourage patriotic love of our country.
10. Strive for unity and love rooted in Truth.

Here are some things we might include in a list of what we owe to God:

1. Adoration, love, and gratitude
2. Obedience to His Word and His Law
3. Worship
4. Repentance
5. Support of His Church by attendance at sacred worship, financial support, and sharing of our gifts and talents
6. Proclamation of his Word both verbally and by witness
7. Devoted reception of the sacraments
8. Raising our children in His truth and in reverence of Him
9. Evangelization (making disciples)
10. Preparing for death and judgment through a holy and reverent sojourn in this world.

A glance at these lists reveals that there is some overlap. One would expect this with God because He defies our human categories and distinctions. In the overlap, we see a setting forth of the great commandment of Love: that we should love the Lord our God with all our soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as our self (e.g., Matt 22:37). For while God is not Caesar and Caesar is not God, love unites both categories.

To love our country is to love our neighbor. To work for, support, and be involved in the common good is to love our neighbor. And to love our neighbor, whom we see, is to begin to love God, whom we do not see. Further, to seek to reform our land, secure justice, and ensure unity rooted in truth is to help usher in the Kingdom of God. To be rooted in God's law, walk in His truth, and raise our children as strong and disciplined disciples of the Lord is to bless this country. To obey God and to walk in sobriety, love, and self-discipline is not only to render to God but also to be a good citizen.

However, it must be clear that God is and must be our supreme love. Jesus is not setting forth an equivalence here. This world is often at odds with God and thus we who would be His disciples must accept the fact that we

will often be seen by this world as though we are aliens from another planet. Neither Jesus nor we should expect to fit precisely into any worldly category or club. We will be an equal-opportunity irritant to any large group. If we are going to be faithful Catholics then we must expect to be outsiders, outliers, and outcasts.

Rendering to God comes first. Too many people today, however, are more passionate about their politics than their faith. They tuck their faith underneath their politics and worldview. They are more inclined to agree with their party than with the Church or even the Scriptures. If you point that out, though, they're likely to accuse you of violating the separation of Church and State (a phrase that does not appear in the Constitution, by the way) or tell you that unless something is infallibly defined (as they determine it) they are free to ignore the teaching of the bishops, the Pope, and/or the Catechism.

Here is the question we must ask ourselves: Do we really put God first? Is His Word really the foundation of our thoughts and views or are we just playing games? Loving this world and working for the common good are not at odds with our love for God, but submitting to worldly categories and human divisions and permitting them to drive our views is most often opposed to God, who will not simply be conformed to human political movements.

God has set forth the Catholic Church to speak for Him but He has not anointed any political movement or worldly organization to do so. No Catholic should surrender to artificial and passing distinctions or to organizations. No Catholic should permit worldly allegiances to trump what Scripture and the Church clearly proclaim. Sadly, today many seem far more willing to render to some version of "Caesar" than to render obedience and allegiance to God and to the Church, which speaks for Him. The Church is an object of faith; a political party is not. Render to God what is God's.

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