

29TH SUNDAY YEAR A

Homily 1 - 2005

The *Herodians* mentioned in today's story were the agents used by Herod to enforce and administer the system of taxation imposed by Rome. One of the imposed taxes was a head tax, equivalent to a day's wage, to be paid by every Jew without distinction. The tax was paid in Roman coinage, and the coin at that time carried the imprint of the emperor Tiberias, with the inscription: *Tiberias Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus, High Priest*. For the Jew that was blasphemous.

The *Herodians* would have seen any suggestion by Jesus that Jews not pay the tax as politically subversive and would have had him arrested. During Jesus' childhood, in fact, some Galileans had refused to pay the tax. They were crucified by the Roman military. For Jesus to suggest, on the other hand, that Jews pay the tax would have been seen by the Pharisees and by the people as his going along with the whole Roman system with its blasphemous making a god of Caesar and its occupation of the land, the land of Israel, God's land. The Pharisees would have accused Jesus of betraying the very heart of Israel - though they compromised in practice. They provided the coin.

Jesus saw through the trap. His response: *Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God*. Jesus was not confirming the separation of religion and politics, unthought of in those days, even by Jesus. For Rome, the emperor was the son of divine Augustus, and was also automatically chief priest. In Judaea the civil as well as the religious administration of the province was in the hands of the Sanhedrin, made up precisely of the chief priests, scribes and aristocrats.

As he so often did, Jesus did not directly answer the question. Their consciences were their own. He went deeper to the heart of the issue. *Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*. *Give back to Caesar*: Distance yourselves from all that Rome stands for: state worship, the whole business of making gods of emperors, acquiring wealth by the brutal conquest of weaker nations, ensuring a life style based fairly and squarely on the ready supply of slaves from conquered lands. Instead, what Jesus was on about - what he called people to - was to give to God what was God's due. And what was God's due will be made perfectly clear next Sunday: *Love God with everything – heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbour*: the total opposite of everything Caesar stood for and Rome was built on.

You can't give your soul to God on the one hand and sell your soul to the imperial ethos of Rome on the other. It is not a case of room for both, each in its proper place. It's still true today. Either it's "capital G" God, or it's the "small g" gods of wealth and security, and their spin offs of consumerism, hedonism, and national self-interest, at the price so often of oppression, injustice and violence.

We have come to celebrate Eucharist, as sons and daughters of God, as brothers and sisters. We see our openness to each other and celebration of diversity as symbol of how

we want our world to be. We rejoice that Jesus freed the world from sin, from indifference, exploitation and violence, because he *loved his neighbour as himself*; and he did that because he loved God with everything. It cost him his life. He now nourishes us with his crucified flesh, and with his blood that bled from that wounded flesh, so that our gathering around this one table might not only symbolise what our world could be but will empower us to do all we can to ensure that it will be.

Homily 2 - 2008

Around the world finance markets are going into turmoil. The fall-out has hit Australia - and the suggested solution is to encourage consumers to buy more. And it may well work. I feel hopelessly out of my depth in the world of finance. But, with all my ignorance, I feel in my gut that something's radically wrong. There are millions of people around the world who are starving ... and we're encouraged to spend money and to buy things that we really could do without. It happens all the time, of course. It just gets talked about more because people have stopped buying. Don't buy, don't consume - and people get put off work. And the poorest get hit the hardest: the poorest here in Australia, to say nothing of the poorest around the world. There must be something radically wrong with the system somewhere. To survive we have to consume what we don't need, and use up the world's limited resources, destroy the forests, exploit the minerals, pollute the atmosphere and eventually complete the circle and threaten our survival anyhow.

Is there an alternative? a better alternative? In today's Gospel Jesus says there's one that's worth the punt. Forget about the accepted wisdoms, the economic rationalisms. *Give back to Caesar what's Caesar's*: Rid yourself of it. Have nothing to do with it. And try - just try - to focus on God. *Give to God what is God's*. And, in case we're not sure what that involves, next Sunday's Gospel will remind us. What's God's? Everything! *You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind*. And you must love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus didn't map out any specific economic system. He just said: Try that, and see what happens. The details you can work out.

And in the meantime? At least, let's try shedding the addictions; don't fall for the illusions; don't believe the advertisers' sub-text. It is happiness we're ultimately looking for. At least let's look somewhere where we're likely to find it. Yesterday, I was reading an article in The Age newspaper. In it the author wrote: *One of my earliest spiritual advisers told me that to be human was to accept that there would never be world peace, but to live my life as though it were possible. This is the core of my aesthetic, the belief in a deeper humanness that is beyond race, class, gender and power even as I know that it is not possible, and yet I strive for it in every way, even when I fail daily at it. In the end we may never know. Perhaps it is enough ... to know that it will always be hard. May we cry, but may we never die of heartbreak*.

Whatever about the author, Jesus said that *the Kingdom of God is near at hand*. But, for it to materialise, it is necessary first for us to *Repent*! Our position can be different from The Age author's. We have hope. It is for another reason, and from another standpoint, that we can say: *May we cry, but may we never die of heartbreak*.

Homily 3 - 2011

Jesus didn't raise the issue discussed in today's Gospel about the question of whether Jews should pay the Roman tax. It was his opponents who hoped to trap him. Had Jesus said: "Don't pay the Roman tax", that would have been seen as civil disobedience; and Herod's bureaucrats, the *Herodians*, were there to take note. To have gone along with the oppressive Roman demands and simply to say: "Yes, pay the tax" would have meant "losing face" before the crowd of oppressed peasant pilgrims thronging the Temple courtyard.

The question came "out of the blue", as it were. But it was something that Jesus had often thought about – and it wasn't hard for him to answer. Remember one of those three temptations that Jesus faced in the desert right at the start of his public ministry, [and that were so graphically depicted by both Matthew and Luke]: *Satan* taking Jesus to the *top of a very high mountain and showing him all the kingdoms of the world*; and then offering to give him all that power and wealth – but at the price, naturally, of worshipping him, the devil.

It is obvious that the Gospels don't have a high opinion of worldly kingdoms and their obsessions with power and wealth. Jesus preached an alternative view of human community and social interaction – one not based on violence, oppression or exploitation – that he called the Kingdom of God. In that Kingdom, the poor, the powerless, the hungry, the dispossessed, the marginalised, would not be forgotten or overlooked but respected and even prioritised. Knowing everyone to be created by God and loved by God, Jesus showed and preached a profound respect for the inviolable dignity of every human person. He envisaged a world order based on that vision of the human person.

The big question was [and still is today]: How to bring it about? In Jesus' time there were those who wanted to bring about change by violence. [Barabbas, and the two criminals crucified with Jesus, had gone that way.] Jesus chose the way of non-violence - what the Gospels somewhat lamely translate as *gentleness*. He believed that the only way to genuine justice and peace was the way of conversion, the way of deliberately chosen love.

It is interesting to look more closely at how Jesus handled the question put by the *Pharisees and Herodians*. He challenged them to produce a *denarius* – the coin of the Roman imperial system. He, apparently, did not carry one. He asked them whose was the image impressed on it. It was the image of the current Roman Emperor, Tiberius. He then asked them to read the words inscribed on it. The Gospel doesn't tell us explicitly what that wording was, but everyone of that period knew only too well. It would have read: "Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus". The Roman Senate had made a god of the previous emperor, Augustus, the man who, with his legions, had conquered what was then the known world. Empires worshipped power and wealth - and those leaders who acquired them. They still do, although they tend to call it military and economic security. Jesus' reply to their question was simply: Give it back. Have nothing to do with it – at least, if you want true peace, true justice, true well-being for every human person.

And then he added: *Give back to God what is God's*. Next Sunday's Gospel will tell us what that is: Love God, not selectively, not within the limits of our comfort zones, but with

everything: *heart, soul and mind*. And, inseparable from that, *Love your neighbour as yourself*. In case we are tempted to think that the mention of *neighbour* lets us off the hook, Jesus had already made clear in his Sermon on the Mount, that life in the Kingdom calls for and empowers loving even those who treat us as enemies.

Do love, respect, non-violence, really work – in the real world? or Was Jesus somehow “off the planet”? I suppose that our presence here today at Mass gives an indication of our answer.

Homily 4 - 2014

The translation in today's Lectionary is accurate: *“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's”*. Some translations give simply, “Render to Caesar..” or “Give to Caesar..”. In my mind there is a big difference. In Jesus' time the Roman Empire had succeeded in making Europe and the Near East a peaceful place to live and a safe place to travel. It had extended Roman Law across its Empire. It prided itself on what it called the “Roman Peace”. Yet the relative peace and safety were secured by the power of its ruthlessly efficient military machine. Roman peace was peace through military conquest. The Empire flourished as it did because it was able to draw on the forced enslavement of many of its conquered peoples and the crippling burden of taxation it imposed on them. Roman Law extended only to Roman citizens. Just a few days after Jesus said the words we are now reflecting on, a Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, sentenced him to death by crucifixion, knowing full well that he was completely innocent.

In saying, *Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's*, Jesus may well have been suggesting something like, “Do not let its values become yours. Have as little to do with it as you can. Keep yourselves clean of its idolatry and its disdain of human dignity.”

Be that as it may, what is of greater interest to us is what Jesus may have intended by *Give back to God what is God's*. What is God's? Everything is! Everyone is! – our very existence, and everything else consequent on that. In saying, *Give it back to God*, he is indicating that everything, everyone, are already gifts given to us by God. Everything, everyone, is gift!

What would our world be like if everyone understood that everything, everyone, were gift of God? It would powerfully affect our attitude to our world. For a start, it would suggest a profound respect for everything. Our world would no longer be approached as something to be owned and exploited at will. A humble stance of contemplation would replace that of domination. None of us could any longer be centre of the world. We could no longer see our world as something to be dealt with simply as we like, or used simply as we choose.

Our attitudes to ourselves would change. Again, we would see everything about us as gift: our creativity and initiative; our capacity to appreciate beauty, to seek truth and to understand reality; our ability to relate and to work out together what is just; above all, our ability to love and to see with compassion. All gift – not given to individuals to be hoarded but given to everyone to be shared

Give back to God what is God's. Give everything, everyone, back to God. What might that *giving back* involve? Whatever about the practicalities, it would presuppose a conscious orientation, a deliberate choice. And would our *giving back* be reluctant? or free and joyful? That may depend on how we view God, on whether we see our God as rejoicing, loving, creative, surprising, gifting and gracious.

Today is Mission Sunday, the occasion for us to re-examine what we are doing to "make disciples of all the nations". We have a wonderful message to communicate, a beautiful vision to share – a message and vision that we keep discovering as we dialogue with our world.

God's greatest gift to our world is the Spirit. That Spirit is already present there and at work, needing only to be recognised. In the unity produced by that Spirit, together we give our world and ourselves back to God. Through, with and in Jesus we move forward into our Eucharistic hymn of thanks and praise of our extravagantly gifting God.

Homily 5 - 2020

The *head* on the *denarius* coin would have been that of the current Roman emperor. The inscription would have named him as "Tiberius, Son of the divine Augustus". Caesar Augustus had died twenty years earlier, and the Roman Senate had promptly, and blasphemously, declared him to be divine. Jesus obviously did not carry such a coin himself, nor would most of the *Pharisees*, especially within the temple precincts. The *Herodians* would have obliged. They were the public servants of King Herod, the local puppet king appointed by Tiberius to rule Galilee and to collect the *taxes* imposed by the Roman Empire to finance, among other things, their all-conquering and brutally oppressive legions.

To that highly unlikely coalition of Pharisees and Herodians Jesus declared, "*Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*" — give him back his taxes and all they stand for: oppression, exploitation, slavery and phoney peace secured at the point of the sword. "Keep clear, as much as you can, of all that and the destructive value-system it represents."

Instead, "*Give to God what is God's*". Jesus insisted on the absolute priority of God's Kingdom, not earthly empires. God's Kingdom is based on nothing less than love, total love embracing all our minds, hearts and wills. Jesus also insisted that such total love of God necessarily takes practical shape in a similar love for other humans, whom he calls our neighbours. All of us, with our myriad different capacities, opportunities, locations and histories, have an equal, God-given, human dignity. Every single person is important and is to be treated respectfully. "*Give to God what is God's*". We human persons are, each in our own way, God's gift to one another.

Jesus did not spell out the practical shapes that that love for others would take politically. But politics is perhaps the most significant realm where practical love for our brothers and sisters finds expression.

Pope Francis has recently released a highly significant Encyclical Letter urgently reminding us that, given the ways that technology has developed and will develop further, unless we quickly learn to treat each other as brothers and sisters, nationally and internationally, we shall soon destroy both our environment and ourselves.

Today's Gospel has become urgently important.

Homily 6-2023

In saying, *Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's*, Jesus may well have been suggesting something like, "Do not let its hollowness become yours. Don't be the dupe of the advertisers! Don't let yourselves be kidded by the smooth-talking and the emptiness of the sloganeers!

What is of greater interest to us is what Jesus may have intended by *Give back to God what is God's*. What is God's? ... when all is said and done? Everything is! Everyone is! – our very existence, and everything else consequent on that. In saying, Give it back to God, he is indicating that everything, everyone, are already gifts given to us by God. Everything, everyone, is gift!

What would our world be like if everyone understood that everything, everyone, were gift of God? It would powerfully affect our attitude to our world. For a start, it would suggest a profound respect for everything. Our world would no longer be approached as something to be exploited at will. A humble stance of contemplation would replace that of domination. None of us could any longer be centre of the world. We could no longer see our world as something to be dealt with simply as we like, or used simply as we choose.

I would love to spend time talking with one of our First Nations individuals — [someone like Miriam-Rose Ungemerr-Baumann, for example, whom I have only briefly met], and sharing with her how she looks on "country"; what country means to her; how she feels about mystery. I remember about forty years ago talking quietly to an Aboriginal woman in Broome. She worked as the priests's housekeeper in the presbytery there for some years. I asked her casually if she prayed much. She replied, "Oh, most of the time, I suppose." I asked her did she read much, and her reply was, "Whenever Fr Mick [the parish-priest] finishes one his spiritual-reading books, he hands it on to me to read afterwards". I regret now that I did not make the most of the prize opportunity there to be treasured.

If we only deliberately used our opportunities, our attitudes also to ourselves would change. Again, we would see everything about us as gift: our creativity and initiative; our capacity to appreciate beauty, to seek truth and to understand reality; our ability to relate and to work out together what is just; above all, our ability to love and to see with compassion. All gift — not given to individuals to be hoarded but given to everyone to be shared.

Give back to God what is God's. Give everything, everyone, back to God. Whatever about the practicalities, it would presuppose a conscious orientation, a deliberate choice. And I

wonder if our giving back would be reluctant? or free and joyful? That may depend on how we view God, on whether we see our God as rejoicing, loving, creative, surprising, gifting and gracious. Is that how we do view God now?

Today is Mission Sunday, the occasion for us to re-examine what we are doing *to make disciples of all the nations*". We have a wonderful message to communicate, a beautiful vision to share — a message and vision that we keep discovering as we dialogue with our world.

God's greatest gift to our world is the Spirit. That Spirit is already present, here and at work, needing only to be recognised. In the unity produced by that Spirit, together we give our world and ourselves back to God. Through, with and in Jesus we move forward into our Eucharistic prayer of thanks and praise of our extravagantly gifting God.

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