

## **TWENTY NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)**

**Gospel (Except GB & USA) Matthew 22:15-21 Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.**

The Pharisees went away to work out between them how to trap Jesus in what he said. And they sent their disciples to him, together with the Herodians, to say, 'Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, 'You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for me? Let me see the money you pay the tax with.' They handed him a denarius, and he said, 'Whose head is this? Whose name?' 'Caesar's' they replied. He then said to them, 'Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.'

**(GB) Matthew 22:15-21 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'**

At that time: The Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle Jesus in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'

**Gospel (USA) Matthew 22:15-21 Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.**

The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, "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?" Knowing their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax." Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." At that he said to them, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

## **Homilies (5)**

### **(i) Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

We probably all recognize the need to pay taxes. We may feel that taxes are too high and we may wonder how well our government is spending the money they take from us in tax. Yet, we all recognize that if the government is to provide for all its citizens, especially through the social welfare system, taxes have to be paid. However, in the time and place of Jesus, the paying of taxes was much more controversial, because they were paid to the Romans, the occupying pagan power. There was one tax in particular that especially disliked, the poll tax which every individual had to pay once a year. It was an annual reminder of the people's subjection to Rome.

In today's gospel reading, two groups who wouldn't normally work together, the Pharisees and the Herodians, combine to ask Jesus a question, intending to trap him, 'Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' Jesus' interrogators wanted a 'yes' or 'no' answer from Jesus. If he answered either way, their trap would spring. If he answered 'yes, it is permissible to pay taxes to Caesar', he would lose face with the bulk of the population who hated this tax. If he said 'no', he could be reported to the Roman authorities as a threat to the peace.

This poll tax was paid with a Roman coin, called the denarius. The fact that Jesus' questioners had this coin in their pockets and could show it to Jesus suggests that they paid the tax. So, by asking them for this coin Jesus showed up the insincerity of their question. They weren't really looking for information; they just wanted to get at Jesus. The denarius had an image of Caesar on one side, at this time the emperor Tiberius, and on the reverse side there was an inscription which declared him to be the son of a God, divine. Jesus finally responds to their question by stating, 'Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God'. His answer shows very clearly that Caesar is not God. Caesar is Caesar and God is God. As they have Caesar's coin in their pocket, they can give it back to him as it belongs to him.

What is it that belongs to God? What are we to give back to God? Jesus would say that we are to give our whole selves to God. Elsewhere in the gospels he calls on us to love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind. Caesar can have his coin, but God wants our whole lives in love, in response to his love of us. Caesar's image may be on his coin, but each one of us is the image of God. We are to live out our identity as people made in the image of God by giving back to God all that God has given to us. There is a prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, which expresses this well, 'Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will. All I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours. Do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me'.

Each of us belongs to many groupings. We belong to a family, a parish community, a state, to various organizations. However, at the deepest level of our being, we belong to God and to God's Son Jesus. Our relationship with God and his Son is to influence all our other relationships, including our relationship with the political authority of the day. As Saint Paul says in one of his letters, we only have 'one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist', and one Lord, Jesus Christ, 'through whom are all things and through him we exist'. The values of Jesus' message and life are to shape how

we see the whole of life, including how we want our taxes to be used by government. As followers of the Lord who calls on us to recognize and serve him in the most vulnerable, we will want our taxes to be used in ways that create a more just and equitable society, where those in greatest need are provided for, a society that reflects in some way the kingdom of God that the risen Lord is always working to bring about on earth.

Today is Mission Sunday. Our mission is to live in a way that shows we belong to God and to God's Son, Jesus our Lord. We are to show by our whole way of life that the most important relationship in our lives is our relationship with the Lord. We are to allow that relationship to shape all our other relationships. Our mission is to allow the Lord to be Lord of all we say and do, so that he can continue his mission in our world through each one of us. We give back to the Lord all that he has given us, our whole lives, so that he can work through us bringing healing where there is sickness, peace where there is conflict, justice where there is oppression and life where there is death.

### **And/Or**

#### **(ii) Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

Image is very important in our media-conscious age. How someone looks can make a bigger impact than what they say. Yet, we are aware that image is not everything. We expect people to live up to the image they present. We look to people to be authentic, and we tend to value authenticity more than image. We resent it when someone appears in a guise that does not correspond to who they really are.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is approached by people who begin by flattering him, 'Master, we know that you are an honest man and that you teach the way of God in an honest way'. Yet, their flattery was deceptive, because their real intent was to trap Jesus, to get him to say something that would leave him at odds either with the people or with the Roman authorities. Their friendly and flattering image was a cover for great hostility. The image did not correspond to the reality.

When Jesus requested a coin from the pockets of his questioners, he showed it to them and asked them, 'Whose image and inscription is this?' The coin had an image of the emperor on it. Behind that image was the reality that this coin belonged to the emperor and should be given to him, and, so, Jesus said 'give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar'. However, Jesus immediately goes on to say, 'and (give) to God what belongs to God'. We might well ask: 'If the coin with its image of the emperor belongs to the emperor, what is it that belongs to God?' Each one of us bears the image of God, and therefore, it is we ourselves who belong to God. Jesus was reminding his questioners that, whereas the coin in their pockets belongs to the emperor, they themselves belong to God, and they must live and behave as people who belong to God. They must give themselves first and foremost to God, and not to the emperor or anyone or anyone else.

If the same question were to be asked of us that Jesus asked in relation to the coin - 'Whose image is this?' - the answer would have to be, 'God's image'. Because we are God's image, we belong to God, and we strive to live our lives accordingly. We are called to live as people who bear God's image, who belong to God. What we owe to God is far more fundamental than what they owe to anyone else. The gospel reading proclaims that the basic loyalty in our lives must be to God. In the words of today's first reading, 'I am the Lord, unrivalled; there is no other God besides me'.

Every other human loyalty is subordinate to that fundamental loyalty in our lives. We owe allegiance to the State, but we owe a greater allegiance to God as Jesus has revealed God. As Christians, our primary allegiance is to the values that Jesus proclaimed and lived. It can happen that people's allegiance to the gospel puts them in conflict with the State. That was certainly true of the time of Jesus and of the time when the evangelists were writing their gospels. The Roman emperor was considered divine, and those who lived in the Empire were expected to honour the emperor as a god, to worship him. The refusal of Christians to do so resulted in their execution. In more recent times, many Christians who refused to submit to the ideology of the Nazi state were put to

death. The great Protestant pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Catholic priest, Maximilian Kolbe, come to mind. There were many others, laymen and women, whose commitment to the values of the Lord at that time resulted in their death.

Today, the pressure on us to compromise the values of the gospel comes less from the State and more from the society and culture in which we live. We can find ourselves under all kinds of subtle pressures to buy into ways of doing things that are in conflict with the values of the gospel. We are called to live as the image of God, the image of Christ. However, the culture in which we live can sometimes offer us other, very different, images to identify with and to live out of. As people who belong to God, we are called to give all areas of our lives to God, to allow God and his Son to shape all the areas of our lives. Yet, the culture of which we are apart can attempt to put a very different shape on some areas of our lives.

When Paul wrote to the members of the church in Thessalonica, he was aware that they were under this same kind of pressure. Yet, at the beginning of his letter, he thanks God for them because they had resisted this pressure. He remembers with gratitude their faith in action, their work of love and their persevering hope. These early Christians can be our model and inspiration. They show us that we can give to God what belongs to God, even when under pressure to do otherwise. We can give to God in this way because of all that God has given to us. In the words of the first reading, God has called us by our name. God has given his Son to us and at this Eucharist we receive anew this great gift. Strengthened by this ongoing gift that God makes to us, we are enabled to live in such a way that we give to God all that belongs to God.

### **And/Or**

#### **(iii) Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

Taxation has always been a contentious issue. We all appreciate that we need to pay taxes if the Government is to have the necessary financial resources to run the country. The issue is around how much tax we should be paying.

Taxation was even more contentious in the time of Jesus because the taxation authorities were the occupying power, the forces of Rome. The question that is put to Jesus in today's gospel reading was a highly contentious one, 'Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' Many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, like the Pharisees, would have given a clear 'no' to that question, because they believed that to pay taxes to Rome was to recognize Rome's legitimacy. Other Jews, like the Herodians, the followers of Herod, would have given a resounding 'yes' to that question because they had a vested interest in the status quo and were doing very nicely out of the Roman occupation. The gospel reading says that the people who asked Jesus the question, the Pharisees and the Herodians, were setting out to trap him. They hoped that no matter how he answered he would end up losing face. In response to the question of the Pharisees and the Herodians, Jesus asked for the money that they pay the poll tax with; the fact that they were able to produce the coin so quickly indicated their own willingness to pay the tax. Noticing that the image of Caesar was on one side of the coin, Jesus declared, 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God'. This is one of those many enigmatic sayings of Jesus in the gospels. The emphasis in that saying seems to be on the second part, 'give to God what belongs to God'. What exactly is it that belongs to God, which should be given to God? Jesus would answer that question by saying that we as human beings belong to God because we are made in God's image. Because we belong to God, we have to give ourselves to God. If Caesar's image is on the Roman coin and, therefore, the coin can be given to Caesar, God's image is on each one of us, and, therefore, we are to give ourselves to God. In next Sunday's gospel reading Jesus spells out a little more what it means to give ourselves to God. Once again the religious authorities ask Jesus a question - 'Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?' Jesus answers, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'. As people made in the image of God, this is what we owe to God, according to Jesus, a love that embraces the whole person. It is clear that

Jesus is saying that no one else is to be loved in this way. There is no one else to whom we are to give ourselves to this extent. Jesus would certainly be saying to his contemporaries that they are not to give themselves in this total way to Caesar who sits on his throne in Rome. This was quite a subversive statement in the context of the time, because Roman emperors thought of themselves and wanted to be recognized as 'sons of God'. The Emperors, in other words, demanded absolute allegiance, the kind of allegiance that was due to a divine figure. For Jesus, of course, there was only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God whom he addressed as Abba, Father. Besides this God there is no other God; Jesus claimed to be the unique spokesperson for this one God and he declares that it is to this one, true God, that we belong, and because we belong to God we are to give him ourselves, all our heart, soul and mind, in love. We give ourselves fully in love to God because God has given himself fully in love to us through his Son. Jesus was saying, Caesar can have the coins that belong to him and bear his image, but that's it.

Jesus is declaring in today's gospel reading that all of human life belongs to God. It is not the case that there is a bit of our lives that belongs to Caesar or to whatever political authority is in power and then another bit that belongs to God. There is nothing in human life that is outside our relationship to God. In that sense there is no sphere in life that is purely secular; there is no area of life in which we are dispensed from living out to the best of our ability our relationship with God in Christ and through the Spirit. In fact, the secular is the normal setting in which we give expression to our spirituality. In everything that we say and do we strive to give glory and honour to God, to please God, to do God's will as Jesus has revealed it. In today's second reading Paul praises the church in Thessalonica, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, for the ways they have shown their faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul gives us there a very fine summary of what it means for us to give to God what belongs to God.

## **And/Or**

### **(iv) Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

Some questions people ask spring from a genuine desire to know. Other questions they ask can be more in the way of trick questions; their purpose is to embarrass us or to catch us out. The question that the representatives of the religious and political establishment asked Jesus in today's gospel reading comes into that second category. 'Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' It is an effort to trap Jesus. If he were to say, 'Yes, pay your taxes to Caesar', he would lose the esteem of many of the Jewish people who resented the Roman presence. If he were to say, 'No, do not pay your taxes to Caesar' he would be liable to arrest and trial by the Romans. They weren't being sincere with their question and, according to the gospel reading, Jesus was aware of their malice. Yet, he was patient with them, asking them for a coin from their pockets.

The question of paying taxes to Rome was a live one in the time of Jesus. A poll tax or a head tax had been recently introduced in Judea. Those who were opposed to Roman rule were strongly against paying this tax. Those who wanted to preserve the peace with Rome, such as the chief priests and other influential people, were strongly in favour of paying it. Jesus' questioners wanted to know where he stood on this matter. Jesus does not give a 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question he is asked. As so often in the gospels, he responds in a way that requires his hearers to think through the meaning of what he says, 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God'.

In Jesus' day, Roman coins, like the denarius mentioned in the gospel reading, bore an image of the Roman Emperor of the day, and around the image was an inscription declaring him to be divine. However, Jesus' response to those trying to trap him with their question shows that the Roman Emperor is not to be considered god. In saying, 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God', Jesus makes a clear distinction between Caesar and God. God is God and Caesar is not God, which was in direct opposition to the

image and title on Roman coins. What is due to God is far greater than what is due to Caesar. God is absolute and Caesar is relative. Jesus does not prohibit paying taxes to Caesar but he affirms that what is due to the true God is much greater.

Elsewhere in the gospel Jesus spells out what is due to God. God is to be loved with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. God is to be our first and greatest love. We are to give back to God in love everything that God has given to us, our whole being. That certainly can never be said of any human authority, including Caesar. The gospel reminds us that our ultimate loyalty is to God. It is God who has first claim on our lives, not any human authority. In the words of the first reading, 'I am the Lord, unrivalled; there is no other God besides me'. Because we believe that Jesus is the full revelation of God in human form, to say that God has first claim on our lives is to say that Jesus, our risen Lord, has first claim on our lives. It is only God, and God's Son Jesus, who is worthy of our total love and loyalty. No human authority, political or religious, is owed what is owed to God and to Jesus. The giving to the Lord of all our love is to shape all our other human relationships, including our relationship with those in political authority. Caesar's image may be on his coins but God's image is on all of us, because we were made in God's image. If Caesar's coins belong to Caesar, we ourselves belong to God and to his Son. We have to assess all human claims on our lives in the light of that primary claim of the Lord. Allowing Jesus to be Lord of our lives will sometimes require us to resist the demands that human authorities make of us, especially when they are at odds with what the Lord is asking of us. We all have to discern how we are to discharge our civil obligations within the overall claim of God on us, as revealed to us by Jesus.

Our love of God with all our being is always in response to God's love of us with all God's being. Today's first reading is taken from the earliest Christian document we possess. There Paul assures the church in the city of Thessalonica that his preaching of the gospel to them in the power of the Holy Spirit was a sign 'that God loves you and that you have been chosen'. It is in

opening ourselves to God's love revealed through Jesus and poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that we are empowered to give to God what is due to God alone, our wholehearted love. Our love of God is then to overflow in a love of all those whom God loves, including the Caesars of this world.

## **And/Or**

### **(v) Mission Sunday**

We can think of mission as something that is the responsibility of others. It belongs to priests and religious, and it involves travel to distant parts. Today, Mission Sunday, reminds us that the whole church is missionary, and that each of us, in virtue of our baptism, has a role to play in the church's mission. To be a member of the church is to be missionary. To believe is to witness to our belief.

Each of us, in different ways, can be a little like Peter in the gospel reading. We can be slow to take ourselves seriously as missionaries. After Peter's experience of the wonderful catch of fish, he may have sensed that the Lord had something in mind for him to do. He attempted to head Jesus off, as it were, with his cry, 'Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man'. Overcome by his own sense of inadequacy and unworthiness, he sought to put as much distance as possible between himself and Jesus. As far as he was concerned, he was merely a fisherman, and not always a very successful one. Perhaps the experience of working hard all night and catching nothing was not new to him. Yet, Jesus recognized that this fisherman, and others like him, could draw people to God. Jesus did not take his leave of Peter, as Peter had suggested. Rather, he called Peter to accompany him and to share in his mission.

The gospels are full of Peters - people from all walks of life who, in various ways, share in Jesus' mission and witness to him before others. Many of these would not have been regarded as 'religious' in the usual sense of that word at the time. They would not have thought of themselves as potential missionaries. We need only think of the leper who 'began to spread the word' after his healing (Mk 1:45), the demon possessed man from the country of the Gerasenes who

'began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him' (Mk 5:20), the parents who brought children to Jesus that he might bless them (Mk 10:13), the Samaritan woman who brought the people of her town to Jesus, the nameless woman who anointed Jesus' feet head with precious ointment, and whose good deed Jesus declared to be part of the gospel (Mk 14:9), the Roman centurion who publicly declared that the crucified Jesus was the Son of God (Mk 15:39). The list could go on. Here are men and women from all walks of life who proclaimed the gospel by their words and deeds.

We are all invited to join the company of these men and women. When Jesus called upon the seventy two to 'ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest', he had all of us in mind. There is a role for each one of us in the Lord's harvest. We each have a part to play in the Lord's mission. There is a task for each of us to do, which, if not done by us, cannot be done by anyone else. We each have a unique set of opportunities to reveal the Lord to others, and to allow those around us to experience the Lord in us. It is not easy to share our faith in the culture in which we live. Faith in God has come to be regarded as something private, like our pin number. Yet, by definition, to believe is to witness to our belief. The very public act of going to Mass on a Sunday is one form of witness. In today's culture where church attendance is declining, such a public act can be more powerful than ever before. Yet, there is more to witnessing and to being missionary than going to church. We are called to be witnesses in our homes, in our schools and colleges, in our offices and our factories, in our supermarkets and our places of recreation. We are called to bring the values of the gospel into all the contexts in which we live, and, also to recognize and to affirm the gospel values that are already there. The call of Peter in today's gospel reading began with Jesus asking him to put out a little from the shore. Jesus subsequently asked him to put out into deep water. The call to put out into the deep can sound rather daunting to us. We may not be ready to launch out into the deep. Perhaps the Lord may only be asking us, for the moment, to put out a little from the shore. There may be some small step we can take to become more missionary in the living of our

faith. When Jesus appointed the twelve, he first called them to be with him, and only after some time did he send them out (Mk 3:14, 6:7). The call to mission begins with the call to be present to Jesus. The first small step the Lord may be asking of us in becoming more missionary could be to become more prayerful. Our prayerful communion with the Lord of the harvest prepares us to be labourers in the harvest of the Lord. We pray for the freedom to take whatever small step the Lord may be asking of us this Mission Sunday.

**FR. MARTIN HOGAN.**

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