

29th SUNDAY OF OT - YEAR A
SCRIPTURE READINGS

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; - "...there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other"

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 - "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers..."

Matthew 22:15-21 - "Then he said to them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

INTRODUCTION

The theme of today's readings is the obligations to God and to one's nation. The readings show us how, with God's help, we can be good citizens of both the earth and Heaven. It means - we owe worship, praise and obedience to God, our Creator; we also owe respect and civil obedience to the civil authorities. Therefore, let us pray and renew our devotion to God and render our duties to our nation faithfully.

Today is World Mission Sunday

Today, the third Sunday of October, is World Mission Sunday. "The Church is not just stationary but missionary." We believe in the good news of our salvation, and we joyfully spread it worldwide in word and exemplary works. The word "Mass" has the same origin as Mission: "to be sent". After every Mass, we are "sent out" (to go forth) into the world and give witness to Christ (Acts 1:8). This is a great day to re-commit ourselves to build the Kingdom of God and helping the ground-level missionaries who are working to build the God's Kingdom on earth. Please continue to pray and support our missionaries (priest and nuns) who have left home, country and family, facing all kinds of challenges and even persecutions for the sake of the Gospel. The second collection taken on this Sunday contributes to the Pope's Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

HOMILY

(Extracted and edited, meditated and added by Fr.Gade)

Theme: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" - On the Subject of Obligations towards Religion and State

Point of Focus: The Covenantal Obligation to be the faithful God's people by faith and the Civil Responsibility to be the good Statesmen by birth

Point of Focus: Money matters, Tax matters, Government matters but God's Reign matters Most

The Context of the Gospel Story

"Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said"

After Jesus entered Jerusalem city, he went into the Temple "and drove out all who were buying and selling there"(Mt 21:12) and he taught the people in many parables. And while He was teaching He was faced with many questions from different groups of religious leaders - Chief priests, Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. These religious leaders considered Jesus more than a nuisance. They perceived him as an enemy to their religious and political authoritarianism. Today's Gospel narrative presents yet another tense and heated dispute.

But this time, the Pharisees join hands with another group called 'Herodians' and try to entrap Jesus with a tricky question about the payment of taxes. You can see the sinister purpose of this attack in the fact that the Pharisees and Herodians united to carry it out, when normally they were harsh opponents of each other. The Pharisees, the religious fundamentalists of the day, hated the Roman tax. The Herodians, who supported the

Roman puppet King Herod, supported the tax who owed his power to the Romans and who worked hand in glove with Roman Caesar. In this situation, they put aside their differences and they combined their efforts for just one reason: to catch Jesus making a fundamental blunder, either about politics or religion.

“Friends, whenever I read the instances of fierce encounter between Jesus with the Pharisees, I always liken it to the kick-boxing sport. In kick-boxing a player uses both his hands and legs to fight and defeat the opponent. The pharisees also often come up to fight Jesus in kick-boxing manner. But, Jesus, like a born kick-boxing champion, avoids the attacks and gives back a knock-out punch of question at them. And to their surprise, every time Jesus emerges as a winner!” - Fr.Gade.

This time too the Pharisees knew that Jesus would win the fight. So, they attempt to butter up the Lord with flattery and insincere praise before laying the trap: “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” Despite their insincerity, their description of the Lord is accurate and true. And Jesus throws at them the punching question - “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

What Tax did people had to pay to Caesar? What was the Trap set for Jesus?

In the book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon listed the following reasons which contributed to empire’s downfall: (1) the rapid increase of divorce which undermined the sanctity of the family; (2) a mad craze for increasingly brutal and exciting sports; (3) the amassing of unnecessary armaments; (4) the decay of religion, and (5) higher and higher taxes. While every one of these causes is deserving of attention, none seems to provoke more discussion than the issue of taxes. The gospel today unveils that thorny issue of Roman taxation in Jesus’ time. During our Lord’s time the Jews were forced to pay three types of taxes to the Roman Emperor: the land (property) tax, the income tax and the census tax/head tax/ poll tax.

The Land tax or Property tax: was one tenth of all grain and one fifth of all oil and wine were to be paid in kind or in coinage to Rome.

Income tax: was one percent of one’s business income to be given to Rome as tax.

The Census tax/Head tax/ Poll tax: was a denarius or a day’s wage to be paid to Rome by all men ages 14-65 and all women ages 12-65, to remind them of their colonized status.

The tax referred in the gospel today as being due to Caesar would most likely belong to the last category of taxes - The Census tax/Head tax/ Poll tax.

The Plot is - If Jesus were to say that it was unlawful to pay the tax, the Herodians and their allies would report him to the Roman officials, who would then arrest him for treason against Rome. If he were to say that it was lawful to pay the tax, the pharisees would have made Jesus appear a traitor to his country and he would be discredited in the eyes of the people for the people opposed paying taxes to a pagan emperor. Here Matthew underscores the insincerity of their motives by the use of a rare Greek term *pagideusōsin* for trap (v. 15). That Greek term usually refers to a devising method to catch animals, often resulting in harm and death. By hook or by crook, they wanted to catch Jesus. Jesus understood their trickery and gave the answer back to them in the form of a question. "Show me the coin used for the tax," he says. They give him a

denarius, a Roman coin. Then holding up the coin, He asks them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied.

Discerning a plot of entrapment, our Lord cuts through the hypocrisy and political differences to the very heart of the matter and says, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." The gospel tells us that when they hear this, they were amazed. He turns the "gotcha" question right back at the Pharisees and slips out of their trap. They leave him and go away because Jesus outwits his opponents with his cleverness and clarity of thought.

"Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God"

Today's Gospel passage is sometimes interpreted to refer to the necessity of maintenance of balanced loyalties: a certain debt is owed to God and a certain debt is owed to the state. But that would be simply a superficial reading and shallow interpretation. As always Jesus lifts today's discourse on to a higher level. "I believe, amazingly this discourse is a historical game-changer that is recommended even today because it is as relevant today as it was in Jesus' time. In that one single statement, Jesus gave us the criterion for the distinction between the political matters and the religious matters; and clear principle for free moral choice to be made from it for the believers of all times, even for us today. That one pronouncement which resounded in Jerusalem temple that day, still echoes today in the verdicts of the courts of law, in the discussions on the streets and in the debates in the universities in all countries. By that single declaration Jesus laid a sure and strong foundation for the 'Freedom of Religion'(the non-interference of State in religious affairs) to be established. That one foundation statement has given the believers of all time the courage and clarity about which side they are to choose, when it comes to the siding between God or King (Religion or Politics)." - Fr.Gade

So, that one statement of Jesus has great implications for all the times. And it is still relevant even today. That single response shows us how to live our faith in the world - to live and earthly perspective and a heavenly perspective. We are part of both an earthly kingdom and God's kingdom. God is the creator of all and source of all things. Everything is the creation of God. A coin made in Caesar's image belongs to Caesar. Jesus tells us that we must repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But everything belongs to God. A person made in God's image belongs to God. "So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them," the book of Genesis tells us. We were made in His image and likeness and belong only to Him. The world is God's kingdom, and we are stewards of that kingdom. For Jesus, being a citizen of God's kingdom matters far more than being a citizen of earth and paying taxes. Caesar can make some claims on us: we must pay our taxes. But God can make every claim on us. All that we have, including our money and the way that we use it, belongs to God. God's authority extends to all things.

There is yet another way to understand what Jesus teaches us today. We know there is the fourth commandment to "honor your father and your mother"(Ex.20:12). As outlined in the Catechism (#2197-2020), the fourth commandment extends beyond the honor one owes to parents. It calls for respect toward extended family, teachers, employers, community leaders, and civil authorities who govern for the common good. The ideal Christian gives honor to both God and those who legitimately deserve it.

However, when loyalties clash, we must remember that God must always come first. God should be our highest priority.

It is easy to remember what we owe to others but we can easily and conveniently forget what we owe to God. Jesus showed us the example that if we give only to Caesar and not to God, Caesar will not be there to welcome us to eternity or to judge how we lived. We give to God because we are giving back to God who first loved us and gave us everything we have and because we look forward to all eternity with God. What we owe to God is far more higher than what we owe to anyone else. Let us remember that total and absolute loyalty and service is a debt that we owe to God and to God alone. "God alone is the true and supreme Lord of the world. Everything, without exception, must be subject to Him, and must serve him, so that whosoever holds the right to govern holds it from one sole and single source, namely, God, the sovereign Ruler of all" (Pope Leo XIII, Immortals Dei #3).

Praxis: Dual Citizenships and Dual Obligations

We have dual citizenship. Following the example of Jesus, both St. Peter (1 Pet 2:13-14), and St. Paul (Rom 13:1-7) also advocated the early Christians to be loyal citizens of the state. By birth, we become the citizens of the country of our birth, and by Baptism we become the citizens of Heaven. By saying: "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God", Jesus is teaching us to exercise our law-abiding allegiance to the government, but above all our best loyalty and obedience to God. One will, as Peter tells "Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Pet 2:17). We have rights and duties of love. We fulfill our duties to our country by paying all lawful taxes, and by contributing our share, whenever called on, toward the common good. Thus, belonging to God means belonging to each other. To give to others what belongs to others in a more virtuous sense means to give to the poor what belongs to the poor. Everyone has a right to the food of the earth and the food of the mind, and shelter for the body. It's not charity when people are given food, education, a home, freedom of religion, freedom of speech – it is justice. To give to God what belongs to God is to share the goods of the earth! May the Virgin Mary help us to always live in conformity with that image of God of love that we bear within us.

The Holy Mass as the Act of giving Worship due to God

Greek philosophers before Jesus defined justice as "giving back to everyone what is their due." Jesus seems to be saying today that the only binding obligation is that of justice, that of giving to every person what is due to them. Serving God is basically a real matter of justice to God! If God has given us all that we are and have, then we are bound in justice to give back to God some gratitude and worship.

The central act of Christian worship is called Eucharist, which means "thanksgiving." "Keeping the Sabbath holy", the attending of the Mass on Sunday is the justice we faithfully and gratefully render to God. It is basically a act of paying back the debt of gratitude we owe to God. We give to God because we are giving back to God who first loved us and gave us everything we have and because we look forward to eternal life with God.

Reflect

Do you render to God what is due to Him as God - worship, honor, glory, praise and thanksgiving? Do you spend your time, talent and treasure in a way that brings glory to God, and to love and serve the needy? Do you pray for the grace to transform society

with the spirit of the gospel? When faced with a choice between civil and religious obligations, do you seek the wisdom of the Lord? Is your involvement in politics and the life of the community a real practice of faith? How do current political principles in your country challenge or support your faith? Have you ever been trapped by conflicting priorities? How open are you to the voice of the Church—the Holy Father, the Bishops, and the social teachings of the Church—in fulfilling your responsibilities as a citizen? Friends, reflect this week on these questions and pray to Jesus to follow His today's teaching. Amen.

A SHORTENED HOMILY

(Extracted and edited, meditated and added by Fr.Gade)

Separation of the Church and the State

Jesus was asked by his adversaries, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" "Show me the coin used for the tax," He says. They give Him a denarius, a Roman coin. Then holding up the coin, He asks them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he says to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." In today's gospel, Jesus seems to encourage us to keep God and King as separate authorities. It may seem that Jesus is setting up two separate and parallel realms of power: one that belongs to Caesar and one that belongs to God, one that is political, and one that is religious. In Caesar's realm you must repay to Caesar what Caesar orders, and in God's realm you must repay to God what God desires. But if we dig deeper, we discover that Jesus does not want us to live a life that is divided into two parts, rather one life of a coin with two sides. Fundamentally, Jesus' response to the Herodians and Pharisees suggests the ethic that Christians ought to adopt. It reminds us of the importance of keeping things in their proper place and distance. There is the line of separation and operation we have to maintain always.

The drama of the Gospel is being played out all around us even today. Many tend to see in Jesus' answer an argument for the separation of Church and state. Of course, we take care not to mix religion and politics. Church and the State have separate roles to play for the common good of the people. Church and State must respect each other boundaries without trying to control each other. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke vociferously about different roles religion and government should play in society and he famously said: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state." King also wrote in *Strength to Love*, a sermon collection. "It (church) must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

What Martin Luther implies is this: 'Separation of Church and State does not mean that the Church must stay out of the affairs of government and public life. IT MEANS THAT THE STATE IS TO STAY OUT OF THE AFFAIRS OF THE CHURCH!' Most crucially, we should not view this as creating a divide between earthly and divine authority. Rather, it shows God's intention for earthly authority to operate in the world and God's purpose to establish His Kingdom. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council took a fresh look at the Church's approach toward civil governments and implicitly affirmed the separation of Church and state in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. That document proclaimed that the individual person requires freedom for the exercise of conscience

and the practice of religion. It stated that "It is wrong for a public authority to compel its citizens by force or fear or any other means to profess or repudiate any religion." It also stated, "When citizens are under the oppression of a public authority which oversteps its competence, they should still not refuse to give or to do what is objectively demanded of them by the common good; but it is legitimate for them to defend their own rights and those of their fellow citizens against the abuse of this authority within the limits of the natural law and the Law of the Gospel" (GS 74).

If we were Thomas More or Thomas Beckett, our choice would lead to the martyrdom as we obey God's will. If we found our government leading us away from the will of God, we would be conscience bound to follow God. From the day that God set up the Garden and put us in it, he has always been consistent. He has always let us decide. And our decisions have always made us who we are. Even if our name was 'Cyrus' (Is 45:1,4-6) and we knew not God; we still are a part of GOD's plan.

There is no reason why the State and the Church cannot work together to improve the lives of their citizens. To minister is 'to serve and not to be served.' So let us pray today for those in public office that they may use their authority rightly, honestly, selflessly and justly for the common good of all the people. Amen.