

Whose Side Are on We Anyway

Texts: Exodus 33:12-23

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (Series A. 20th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps.99

Matthew 22:15-22

"Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God. " When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Prayer

A nine year old girl who returned from Sunday School and as her father was sitting down with the Sunday news paper, she asked him some questions. "Daddy, why did God make all the leaves green?" He thought a moment and replied, "I don't know." Then she asked, "Daddy, if God made the world and everything else, who made God?" Again he said, "I don't know." She asked him another one: "Father, how did Noah catch the two snakes and put them in the ark?" He put down the newspaper and said, "I don't know."

The little girl sensed that her father was a bit agitated, so she asked, "Do you mind if I ask you questions, daddy?" He replied, "Not at all. How are you going to learn anything if you don't ask questions?" Like many children, this little girl was asking dad some very important questions, but questions that we adults stumble around trying to find answers. Dad was right in answering, **"I don't know"** because there are certain questions for which we have no answers, at least until that day when we ask God face to face (and most likely they won't be important to us any more).

We are faced with questions all the time and we struggle to find answers to them. The Pharisees and Herodians raise the age-old question of religion and politics. (*The Pharisees resented paying taxes and the Herodians were pro-Roman and gladly paid.*) They asked, "Is it right, according to God's will, to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" This was no trivial problem.

The Jews were taxed heavily by the Romans – they taxed grain, oil and wine, taxed every male from age of fourteen and every female from the age of twelve they had to pay tax for just being alive. Those who asked Jesus the question were setting him up. Whichever way Jesus answered he would get into trouble.

If he said, "Yes, it *is* lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor," he would be in trouble with his own religious leaders who deeply resented the oppression Rome had imposed on their nation. Clearly, Jesus would be a traitor to his own people, if he answered yes.

On the other hand, if he said, "No, it is *not* lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor," he would be a traitor to Rome. Roman taken control of Palestine, and required taxes from all the citizens. If Jesus spoke against paying those taxes, he would be subject to arrest and imprisonment.

And how does Jesus answer. He asks for a coin. Whose picture is stamped on the coin? The emperor's! Well then, it's simple. He put his hand his pocket drew a coin with Caesar picture stamped on it. You give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But be careful! Don't give to Caesar what belongs to God. End of discussion.

Jesus cleverly states there are those things that belong to the government and those that belong to God. Respect the state, it's God-given authority, and the order it brings, be informed about community issues, pay our taxes, speak up against anti-Christian policies and laws, support policies that help the weak and downtrodden.

Give to God your worship, your prayers, your service and love to your fellow human beings, support the church and its mission to the world, remind the government and its leaders, in the name of God, what its obligations are and where its limits lie.

Someone summarized Jesus' words saying, "The coin bears Caesar's image; human bears God's image, so give the coin to Caesar" - meaning pay tax – "but give yourself wholly to God." Serving God covers all of life. It also includes serving Caesar in a way that brings honour and glory to God.

Jesus is giving us some broad principles but notice he doesn't give any simple answers about *how* we are to carry out this responsibility. The question about what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God remains open. You and I must decide that for ourselves - assess each new situation. And that goes for the Church as whole. As each situation arises it must decide whether to speak up or not.

Why doesn't God make a decision once and for all, and with authority set up, what is our responsibility to God, and what is our responsibility to the government and so on? We all long for a clear ruling, one that is binding, one that will relieve us all the headache of making a decision. But Jesus doesn't make the decision for us. He challenges us to find out again in each new situation what action we ought to take.

Everywhere in life - in our marriage, in visiting the sick, as a teacher in a school, as an executive doing his/her tax return, as a mother or father - we have to pose the question anew everyday – "**what does God wants us to do in this situation**". So often we cannot answer the questions we have, by thumbing through the Bible to find crisp, clear answers. There is no dictionary we can look up what we have to do here and now to please God.

We need to look at all these issues as people who have been made new through the dying and rising of Jesus. It's easy to condemn, to fall in line with what others are saying, to let our own feelings or our traditions make the decision for us.

In our Baptism we have shared in what Jesus did for us, we have been given a totally new life, a totally new way of looking at the problems that confront us, a totally new outlook on the moral dilemmas that challenge us.

For the born anew in Christ, the issue always is what would Jesus want me to do? The Gospels tell us that when Jesus came across a prostitute, instead of quoting the Ten Commandments to her, he loved her and said, "*Your sins are forgiven*". When he met the white-collar cheat Zacchaeus, he befriended him and went to dinner with him. To those who were exiled from their community because of a dreadful disease, he showed love and compassion and gave them healing.

You see God does not give us a list of laws and detailed instructions for carrying them out. He doesn't lead us around by the nose in every detail of our lives, rather he desires to make us mature sons and daughters, confident of his love, confident of our relationship with Jesus our Saviour, and that in his love we discover what is the right thing to do.

We need to be diligent in coming to know God's mind even better through studying the Scriptures. We need to be unceasing in our prayers for the Spirit's guidance, and knowing that there will be others with contrary beliefs seek to resolve the matter in an atmosphere of love and mutual respect.

Among other things, this is a reminder that each one of us can speak to God in our own voices with our own words and tell, ask, and even demand, and then quietly, patiently, and with an open heart, listen for ~ and accept ~ how and when God chooses to answer.

We make decisions about some of those tough questions in life in the knowledge that he forgives us when we do make mistakes. It is a comfort to know of the forgiving love of God, otherwise we would be frightened to make any decisions at all. Let's remember that God can even use those decisions that are poorly made.

Paul reminds us to recognize and live into our deep relationship with God as we build our trust and faith, to feel the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Each breath we take comes from God and that awareness gives us the willingness, however tentative at times, to begin to act upon it.

The more we are conscious of living our faith, the more faith grows, and our prayer and action become a truer reflection of the image of God that we already are.

Final thought: We are created in the image of God and we are called to give the currency of ourselves to God's purpose. Although Moses was denied seeing the Face of God, seeking and finding God in Christ in one another is the only facial recognition we need.

What Jesus gives us in today's gospel is not a hard and fast rule for every situation, but the permission to struggle with the question of what it is appropriate for us to do in the world that God created. What Jesus gives us is not an excuse for withdrawing from secular society, but rather the assignment to go and love and serve our fellow human beings to the glory of God.

Whose side are we on anyway?

I hope we can all say convincingly on God's side.

Amen.

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