



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, October 19, 2008
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Matthew 22:15-22

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“SHOW ME THE MONEY...”

[Jesus said,] “Show me the money for the tax.” And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

This famous confrontation of Jesus with his enemies over the payment of taxes to Caesar occurs between Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (“Palm Sunday”) and his arrest, trial and crucifixion. The enemies were working up a charge that Jesus, who had attracted great crowds, was a disturber of the peace and a danger to governance in Judah.

The tax in question was the census tax. It was paid with the Roman coin, the denarius, which was a day’s wages. For it, the Jews received the benefit of government by their Roman overlords. The Pharisees, the orthodox Jews of the day, resented but paid it. The Herodians, who supported Caesar’s puppet dynasty of Herod the Great and his family, benefited from Roman rule. United in their animosity to Jesus, these strange bedfellows aimed to put the Lord between a rock and a hard place with their question about the lawfulness of paying the tax. If Jesus approved paying taxes he would offend the Jewish nationalistic groups and their many adherents; if he disapproved payment he could be reported as disloyal to the empire.

The enemies begin with flattery. “Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus returns the compliment without flattery: “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?” Refusing the bait for the trap that has been set, he says, “Show me the money for the tax.”

The denarius was a silver coin stamped with the likeness of Tiberius Caesar, and was inscribed, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, High Priest.” [Augustus had started the tax at the time Jesus was born thirty-something years before].¹ The coin was created

¹ Harrington, S.J., Daniel J., *The Gospel of Matthew, Sacra Pagina series*, p. 310.

by and for Caesar. “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” said Jesus.

The Lord’s brilliant response here should not be pressed into a political philosophy, for that is just what Christ avoided and what his enemies sought from him. It is simply clear that Jesus and the early church paid Caesar his taxes, yet they did not confuse Caesar with God. Both apostles Peter and Paul in their letters say that Christians should pay taxes, honor the Emperor (the State), and be good citizens. There is no mention much less recommendation of political persuasion.

The point is to be found in the second part of Jesus’ famous sentence, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, *and to God the things that are God’s.*” Caesar mints coins and controls currency, as we ourselves have seen very dramatically in the current financial crisis. God makes human beings in his image and likeness, endowing us with memory, reason and will, giving us the capacity to choose, to pray, to love. These are “God’s things,” expressed in the virtues that are of real value in any time and place.

If we render to God the things that are God’s, we will also be the best of citizens for the State. The State under God is the instrument to keep peace and order, to maintain safety, to restrain evil, to uphold justice. The best citizens can be salt that preserves; light that shines; leaven for the whole lump of society. Christ’s followers are good citizens for conscience’s sake, even if under some circumstances they have to be conscientious objectors to State policies. The early Christians, having paid their taxes and made the case that they were loyal to the empire, nevertheless were martyred in large numbers for their refusal to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor.

In the United States, we are blessed to be participants in electing the leaders of this nation founded to uphold the “unalienable rights” of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The faith of Christ obliges us to be good citizens, and under that rubric it is our privilege and duty to vote and to be as informed on the issues as we can be. When I vote, I have discharged a duty of conscience not only to my country but to the Lord. So if you are a citizen of age, it is your responsibility to register to vote and to do so.

We are dual citizens. We are citizens of the kingdom and city of man, and we are citizens of the kingdom and city of God. The two citizenships are not separated from each other in sealed compartments. They are distinct, but they influence and impinge upon each other. At the beginning and the end of the day, the things of God matter the most by far. Whatever the state of the economy, whatever the political season and climate, whatever the issues in the news, each of us has, this very day, an immortal soul to save for all eternity. This requires rendering to God the things that are his, beginning and ending first and foremost with this soul of mine and its God-given free will. Christ’s Gospel stands before us to be embraced, today. You and I, today, have heaven to attain and hell to avoid. We have sins to repent of. We have virtues to acquire. We have duties to fulfill. We have people, places, things and events to encounter with grace. We have trials and tests to face. We have a death to prepare for and perhaps to undergo, this very day. This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Let us render to God the things that are his.

Remember again Jesus’ parable of the Rich Fool, the man who was rich in everything except the things of God. Just as he was congratulating himself on his comfort and security and was taking his ease, God visited him and said his life was required of him, there and then; and the things he had gathered, whose now would they be? Be rich in the things of God and good citizens, above all, of the kingdom and city of God. As for this world, with

its kingdoms and cities, it can be very good and beautiful (as in “America the Beautiful” and other patriotic hymns); but we are passing through it, just as it also is passing away. Our own beloved country is perishable; it has a limited life-span. But God’s kingdom is forever and his city is everlasting. Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, rendering God’s things to God; and then Caesar’s things, America’s things, the things for the time being, will be blessed as well.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.