

53 Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A October 18, 2020
Isaiah 45:4,4-6 Psalm 96 1Thessalonians 1:1-5 Matthew 22:15-21

Imagine our country has recently been defeated in war by the ISIS terrorist army. Foreign troops are now stationed in every Canadian city, town and village. Our government is now in the hands of these terrorists. The life we know is changing by the minute.

Try to imagine how we would feel. Imagine how we would react that a foreign country now rules Canada and our lives. Imagine how you might feel with your freedom taken away. Imagine how we would react if we are now forced to pay taxes to the foreign country. If you fail to pay the taxes you're either thrown in jail or put to death.

That could be a similar situation to what it was in Palestine in Jesus' day. The Jewish people of Palestine deeply resent the Romans who now rule their beloved country. The people especially hate the annual census head tax imposed by the military government on every man, woman and child. It is more the principle of having to pay taxes to the foreign country than the amount of money paid that upsets the Jewish people.

In today's Gospel there are two main ruling groups in Jerusalem. The first group are the Herodians who are supporters of King Herod, the pagan puppet king of Rome. They believe in paying the census tax in order to win favour with the foreign authorities who have imposed it so as to avoid war. However, the second group, the Pharisees, *oppose* paying the taxes because paying them is against God's authority over His Chosen People and should not be paid at all.

Although these two groups are archenemies and oppose each other, they are conspiring to trap Jesus. They ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay tax to the foreign Roman emperor or not. They are not acting in good faith but are interested only in trying to discredit Jesus. Why? Because they want to know whose side Jesus is on. A simple *yes* or *no* will answer the question. Instead, Jesus does not answer them.

The question is a loaded one. If Jesus says *yes*, it *is* lawful to pay the Roman tax, the Pharisees will accuse Jesus of betraying His own Jewish people and God's authority. They would brand Him a *traitor* to the Jewish people. On the other hand, to answer *no* will cause Jesus to be arrested by the Romans for opposing the taxes. Jesus

would be branded as a *traitor* to Rome. Jesus recognizes the trap and instead He gives a historic and famous response that applies not only to that century but also to all centuries.

Jesus asks them to show Him a Roman coin which is used to pay the tax. Upon receiving the coin, Jesus asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answer, "the Emperor's." Jesus' intention in asking the question is not to insult them, but to challenge them. Looking at the Roman coin, Jesus says to them, "Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus does not ask, but the next question is implied: "*Where do we find God's image and inscription?*" The answer is, *We find it in us*, His children. God created us in His image and inscribed His law on our hearts. No matter what their allegiance to Rome, Jesus' message to His opponents is that they belong God. Caesar may claim the coins to be his own, but he cannot claim people; they are claimed by God.

We are God's people, we belong to Him. We must repay to God what belongs to God. How do we do this? We do this by giving God our very selves, *loving Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind*. We do this by giving God the best we have to offer, *our first fruits of our time, talent, and treasures*. We do this by giving God our primary allegiance, *putting God first, before nations or kingdoms, political or economic systems, institutions or ideologies*.

Jesus' listeners think they cannot serve two masters, both God and Caesar, meaning either they give to God or give to Caesar. Jesus says it is not "either . . . or" but it should be "both . . . and." We ourselves also have responsibilities to the social order and we have responsibilities to God. In other words, Jesus is saying that both groups have an obligation to Caesar and an obligation to God. The two should go together.

Herein lies the issue of Church and State. Centuries ago, some people said that Church and State should be one. In the Middle Ages this was called the "union of throne and altar." The problem is which throne, which altar? Political parties ebb and flow in their power, depending which one is in power at the time. We don't want any church to be the arm of any political party.

There are benefits from the State. The State provides churches with police and fire protection. Church property is exempt from taxation. Our Federal Government does

not tax our collections as income because the Church provides many services to the community at large.

The State also gives great assistance in providing for people's welfare in promoting the common good. It should not surprise us that the Church calls us to abide by our society's just laws, and to faithfully fulfill our civic duties and responsibilities, such as voting and paying taxes.

Normally conflicts of interest and our loyalty to the laws of our country need not contradict our obedience to God. A good Catholic, by keeping his or her thoughts on heaven while having his or her feet firmly planted on earth, can serve both God and country and be faithful to both.

However, tensions can exist between our loyalty to God and our duty to our country, especially when political questions touch upon faith and morality, such as same-sex marriage, stem cells, cloning, and abortions. Catholics can be faced with a real dilemma, "How can one be a Catholic in a secular world where the laws may often not be Catholic ones?"

We find ourselves asking: "Can I be a good Catholic and a good citizen of my country at the same time? Can I support government officials who approve of legalized abortion or euthanasia or favour a host of other issues that are in conflict with the teachings of Jesus and His Church?"

The Catholic Church is the voice of conscience, a *community of conscience*. The Church has the numbers and strength to question official policies where Gospel values are at stake, because government policy has moral implications. It can build up or weaken families; it can protect or destroy life; it can enhance or weaken human dignity; it can support or burden the practice of religious freedom.

For Catholics, God must always have the first claim on our conscience. With regard to those laws and practices that are unjust, that contradict God's laws, that deny the sanctity of all human life and strip people of their dignity, we are called to work within our governmental systems to bring an end to such immoral practices by voting for politicians who support Catholic values of faith and morality. Our faith should influence our politics because we Catholics can bring moral vision to our nation. If we don't, then someone else will bring his or her own priorities to what the government does.

Jesus is saying to us that we have obligations to Caesar and obligations to God. We can apply that to our time. Each generation has to work out the balance between the two. We give Caesar, that is, our government, our taxes, our loyalty, our judgment. But our conscience, our soul, our choices in life belong to God. In the evening of life, we will be responsible for what we have done as individuals and citizens, not to Caesar, *but to God.*

As we give worldly obligations their due, our first and highest commitment must be to God and His commandments. We are encouraged to raise people's thinking and lift up their actions to make the world a better place in which to live. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God first, but we can still love, respect, correct and challenge those who govern us on earth.

We are called to have our presence and our faith make a difference in the world. This is something we must keep uppermost in our minds. By remaining steadfast in our faith at home and in public life, we show that our reward is not sought in this world but in the Kingdom of God. Let's always remember that we are sent out to give witness to the Gospel truth and help build up God's Kingdom on earth.