

TALK TO ONE ANOTHER

Pentecost XX, (Proper 24) Matt 22: 15-22

Well, here we once again see the Pharisees approaching Jesus, but this time, not alone but also with the Herodians. This is a strange and unlikely alliance indeed. Only a mutual distaste for Jesus could have pushed these two parties together.

The Herodians were a priestly group whose power base in Israel was founded largely on a set of alliances forged with the occupying roman government.

I think we are more familiar with the Pharisees whose word comes from Greek meaning separated ones. The Pharisees, by contrast to the Herodians, were a lay group within Judaism with a fervor to obey the law of Moses and to keep alive the zeal of the prophets. At Jesus' time, the Pharisees were the most powerful religious group among the Jews. They were not Jesus' favorite people as he continually denounced their external observance of the law, their multitude of petty traditions, and particularly their self-righteousness. The Pharisees regarded with scorn all those who did not come up to their own rigorous standards.

So, these two, in spite of their differences joined together to question Jesus. This first dialogue with Jesus was actually a sinister trap master-minded by the Pharisees and their disciples.

The exchange begins with a bit of flattery, which functions merely as a setup for the trick question that follows. The effect of their praise is to say, "ok mister truth-teller who never shies away from controversy, handle this hot potato." The hot potato in question has to do with the legality of paying taxes to the roman emperor. For a quarter of century, Jews had been forced to pay, in roman currency, a head tax to the roman government. Some Jews rested easy with roman rule and supported the tax (probably including the herodians) but most of the citizens of Judah reacted to the idea of paying money to the pagan emperor with distaste ranging from mild provocation to seething insurrection. I must say, I do not think many of us are happy with the tax situation in our own day and age.

So, to raise the question of paying taxes to the emperor was to pull the scab off a political and theological wound, which is exactly what Jesus' questioners did. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" They asked. This put Jesus in a precarious position. If Jesus were to say, "No, according to the law of god, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," then the roman government would swiftly move in on him as a dangerous political agitator. On the other hand, if Jesus were to answer, "yes, it is lawful to pay the roman tax," then he would lose credibility with many of the people who paid the tax but did so only begrudgingly, since they considered the tax an illegal act of an oppressor government and a moral affront to their religion.

Jesus is certainly not stupid; he was well aware of the treachery of his interrogators and he cleverly sidestepped by asking for one of the tax coins and asked whose image it bore. "The emperor's" they answered. Jesus answered, "Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Basically there are two ways to understand Jesus' statement: a mild way and a more radical version. The mild version interprets Jesus' word to mean, 'look, the tax is not the issue. You pay the tax with roman coins, and they bear the emperor's image and belong to the emperor. So give the emperor his little coins back and get on about the more important business of rendering your lives to god. The coin is created in the emperor's image, but you are created in god's image; so give your whole self to the god who owns you.'

Or you might prefer the more radical version in which Jesus refuses to answer the question and actually turns the tables on his questioners, showing them up as two-faced hypocrites. The question they posed to Jesus was

designed to allow Jesus two equally bad alternatives. They ask, “Are you a foolish, uncompromising revolutionary whose allegiance to the kingdom of heaven is actually a political revolution in disguise, or are you a smooth-talking street preacher who stirs up people with glib talk of god’s majesty but who underneath advocates a get-along-go-along policy with the roman, gentile pigs?”

Jesus responds to this trick with a gambit of his own. When he asks them for a tax coin, they unsuspectingly reach into their purses and withdraw the evidence that exposes them- not him- as deceptive and hypocritical compromisers. They are the ones carrying around Caesar’s money, not Jesus; they are the ones who have the emperor’s image in their purses; they are the ones who have already bought into the pagan system. In this interpretation, Jesus’ words mean, everyone has to decide between Caesar and God. No one can serve two masters. You seem to have made your decision, forged your convenient compromise. But what about your obligation to god? Render to God what belongs to God. Choose this day whom you will serve.

You know, things really have not changed much from those days. We still have people who hate others and still try to denounce them by asking tricky questions hoping to get them into trouble just as the Pharisees and the herodians tried with Jesus. This is certainly not a new talent in this day and age. Just watch TV, listen to the news, watch conventions and discussions, listen to interviews and many other events. People have not changed- you will hear many try to get others in trouble as the Pharisees did with Jesus. No, indeed, humanity has not changed.

What Jesus says is that, although we may have to live under this or that Caesar and that we may have to plunk down this or that tax, we are never Caesar’s. We belong, body and soul, to the living God, and we are to render to God what is God’s. Amen