

HOMILY FOR TRINITY 19 – OCTOBER 18TH 2020-10-15

Today's Gospel describes a trap that is laid for Jesus by the Pharisees who are envious of his success with the people, and they want him to compromise himself by taking a stand on a very dangerous issue.

Their approach is particularly cunning by starting off praising Jesus' fidelity to truth and his courage in voicing it. Then they pose a thorny question: "Is it lawful to pay tax to the Emperor, or not?"

The situation is delicate. Jesus must give a Yes or No answer, and either answer will put him in an impossible situation. If he answers "yes" the Pharisees will cry "murder," because he has taken sides with the Roman invader and, in their estimation would have betrayed God.

If Jesus answers "no" then the Herodeans will denounce him to the Romans as a political threat, a rebel who opposes the law of the occupying power. Jesus' questioners are not looking for truth they are trying to pull him down. An honest answer isn't possible in such an atmosphere of confrontation and hypocrisy, yet he must answer.

The scene took place just before the Feast of the Passover and there were many Galileans amongst those gathering for the feast and no doubt the Romans were present in the crowd, prepared for any disturbance amongst the gathering.

What better way was there to get Jesus into trouble than to have him speak out against the tax. But, unbeknown to them, by doing this very thing they are trapping themselves.

In fact, Jesus bypasses the question of tax and goes to the heart of the matter. He turns to them requesting a coin and asks them to describe the image on it. They tell him that it is Caesar's and he replies with those famous words: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesars, but give to God that which is God's."

They cannot rebut our Lord's answer, or reproach him; they just have to back off.

Jesus' reply is rich in meaning to us. The fact is that he doesn't give a direct answer to their question at all; he does something better. He indicates that man has obligations which make him subject to both Caesar and to God.

With his unique wisdom Jesus never laid down rules and regulations; that is why his teaching is timeless and never goes out of date. He always lays down principles and here he lays down a very great and very important one.

Every Christian has a double citizenship. They are citizens of the country in which they happen to live and to it they have a duty to Caesar in return for the privileges that the rule of Caesar brings to them.

The Christian is also a citizen of heaven and there are matters of religion and of principle in which the responsibility of the Christian is to God.

When we, as Christians, are convinced that it is God's will that something should be done within our family, within our society or within our country we should support it; or, if we are convinced that something is against the will of God, we must resist it.

The point is that man has complimentary duties and obligations. How are we to determine what they are? How are we to spell them out more precisely?

This is the permanent truth which Jesus lays down here with his reply to the Pharisees that we are, at one and the same time, good citizens of the country in which we live and a good citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. This way we neither fail in our duty to God, or to fellow citizens. We will, as St. Peter tells us in his letter to Jewish exiles in Galatia and Cappadocia, "Fear God and honour the Emperor...."

Both Isaiah and St. Paul provide us with an excellent commentary on Jesus' reply to the emissaries of the Pharisees. In the text of Isaiah, King Cyrus is the Caesar of today's Gospel. He is a pagan who doesn't know the Jewish law. He is an enemy of God in the eye of the Israelites

In St. Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians we read of his greeting to that community, giving thanks to God for his Church, its faith, hope and charity being the works of Jesus.

Jesus made it clear that we have duties to Caesar, who symbolises contemporary society, and to God, who is the absolute master of all. Paul and Isaiah indicate how these duties are to be carried out in proper proportion.

In avoiding the Pharisees' trap, Jesus isn't saying that their question is unimportant, nor is he denying the importance of politics, because he was himself taking up a deliberate political stance.

Jesus could see how the people were heading towards war and destruction unless they made a radical change in their way of life. He was convinced that the change had to be, first and foremost, in their relationship with God.

Everywhere that Jesus looked he could see people downtrodden, enslaved and oppressed. Whole groups within society were feeling helpless, living under a cloud of anxiety and superstition. The only answer was a change – a change of mind and of heart and a greater closeness to God.

What Jesus strove to achieve was liberation from this oppression, including that caused by those who exercised power in God's name because of their political position and the religious organisation of the day.

In the scene before us Jesus challenges the Pharisees and the Sadducees to give back whatever power they have that comes from the Emperor and to give to God "the things that are God's."

It is a permanent truth which Jesus lays down that a good citizen of their country and a good citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven will never fail in their duty to God or man. They will as St. Peter says in his letter to those Jews living in Cappadocia and Galatia, "fear God and honour the Emperor..."