

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 45:4-6
<i>Response</i>	Give the Lord glory and honor.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 1:1-5B
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Shine like lights in the world as you hold on to the word of life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 22:15-21

For the last few Sundays, we've been looking at the parables of Jesus that he told while he was in Jerusalem during his last days; and we've been looking at the mounting opposition from the Pharisees and the chief priests and the elders toward Jesus as he continues to warn them that if they reject his Messiahship and they reject him and his apostles, that they are going to face divine judgment, and in particular the city of Jerusalem will ultimately end up being destroyed. For this Sunday we are looking at not a parable of Jesus, but a riddle of Jesus. You could call this the riddle of Caesar and the coin. It's the famous story of the coin that Jesus is presented with, and he is asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not, and then gives his response. So for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A, we are going to be looking at Matthew 22:15-22:

Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and

to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away. ¹

You might notice that that last verse that I just read is not in the lectionary, but again I included it because it's an important clue for us as to the audience of this particular saying, and to how they responded. So Jesus here is once again speaking to the Pharisees, who were very prominent leaders amongst the Jewish people who were testing him. They were trying to entrap them. They were trying to entangle him — literally as the text says — “in his talk.” So what does that mean? This is the context of Jesus’ teaching, but what's the meaning of the entrapment that they're trying to engage in. Well in this case, the trap is really simple. They are trying to get him to give a yes or no answer to the question of whether it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. And the reason that they're doing this is because either way he answers the question, yes or no, can get him in trouble. If Jesus, for example, says “yes, it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,” he could be accused by his fellow Jews of being a Roman sympathizer. You might recall that there were lots of Jews in the first century A.D., especially the zealots, who were vehemently opposed to the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and to the land of Israel. They saw the Romans as pagan overlords who had no right to be there, and they also saw, for example, Jewish tax collectors as the virtual equivalent of Gentile sinners, in part because they were colluding with the occupying forces of the Roman Empire.

So if Jesus says, “oh, yes, you have to pay taxes to Caesar,” he can be accused of being a Roman sympathizer and fall out with his Jewish contemporaries, his fellow Jews. On the other hand, if Jesus says “no, it's not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,” he can then be accused by the Romans of sedition, or of rebellion against the Roman government. So by seeking a yes or no answer, the Pharisees here are trying to get Jesus into trouble no matter what answer he gives. But, as is always the case in the Gospels, you just can't trap Jesus. Don't do it. It is not a good idea, because the trap will always spring back in your own face. You're always going to end up being trapped yourself. And in this case, Jesus responds to the Pharisees —

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

his famous response — “show me the coin for the tax.” It is an extremely powerful answer to their question. But again, we need a little bit of Roman context here. What's going on in this? When Jesus says “show me the denarius for the tax,” he's referring to particular kind of coin. The denarius was a small coin that would be stamped with the profile of the face of the Emperor. What's cool about this is that we actually have coins that have survived from the period of Jesus' life. From around A.D. 14 - A.D. 37, the Emperor, the Caesar, was named Tiberius, and he produced many of these coins that were stamped with his profile. On these coins was an inscription — this is really interesting and you can actually find pictures of this on the internet today — which read “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.”

Now think about that for a second. When they hand Jesus the coin, it not only has the face, the graven image, of the Roman Emperor — that alone might've caused some problems with Jews because in the Old Testament book of Exodus 20:4 there was a law against any graven images and yet here is a graven image of the Emperor on the coin — but even more, underneath the graven image of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor at the time of Jesus, it not only called him Caesar, it not only called him the Emperor, it called him the son of God; because his father Augustus was regarded as divine by the Romans. You might not realize this, but this is really important. In the first century A.D., the two previous emperors, Julius Caesar and Augustus, had both been divinized. They were both elevated to the status of gods by the Roman Empire. You can see this if you read Suetonius' famous biographies of the Emperor, it is called the *Lives of the Caesars*. When he gets to Julius Caesar and to Augustus, he calls them the life of the Deified Julius and the Deified Augustus, the Divine Julius and the Divine Augustus.

So in essence, what the coin that they would've handed to Jesus would've had on it was an image of Caesar who was claiming to be the son of God. Now in that context, think about the political and the theological ramifications of the tax that was being paid to Caesar. And so what Jesus does is something — I want to say it is brilliant, but because he is the son of God that sounds a little understated — really ingenious. He takes the coin with all of that written on it and he says “well whose likeness and inscription is on this?” And they say “Caesars.” And we know that's true, it would've had the inscription and the profile of Tiberius on the coin. And then he says to them “render therefore to Caesar the things that belong to

Caesar, and to God the things that belong to God.” Now most of us recognize here that Jesus is, in a very shrewd way, giving permission to pay the tax to Caesar. He is saying that the money can go to Caesar, it can be paid lawfully to Caesar. And frequently people will use this as an example for teaching and enjoining Christians to be dutiful to the state. In other words, that they need to give the state what is due to the state, and that they should pay taxes and be contributing members of society. And that is a part of what Jesus is getting at, but that is not really the heart of what Jesus is getting at.

If you look at it, there's a double meaning here in Jesus's words, because when he says that the likeness is on the coin and the inscription, the Greek word there is *eikōn*. It means likeness, and we get the English word icon from this. So when he says there that the icon of Caesar means that the coin belongs to Caesar, he's allowing for the lawfulness of paying taxes to the Emperor. But, by taking this image, this language, of likeness, Jesus is also alluding to another occurrence of that word in the book of Genesis. You might remember in the Old Testament, in Genesis 1:26-27, God, when he makes man and woman, he says that he made man and woman in the “image and the likeness of God.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament there is the same word, *eikōn*. So it says that man and woman were made in the *eikōn* of God. They are literally icons of the creator. They bear the image and the likeness of God. So there's a double meaning here. What Jesus is essentially saying to the Pharisees in response is, you can give your money to Caesar, but you need to give your life, yourself, to God. That's why in that final verse, which the lectionary leaves out, but which I think is very important, you read these words, “when they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and they went away.” In other words, they marveled, they wondered at the truth of what Jesus is saying; and they also marveled at the fact that they couldn't catch him in the trap. His answer was too brilliant. His answer was too shrewd.

So that's the basic thrust of the parable in the context of Matthew's Gospel. How then do we connect it with the other readings for this Sunday in Ordinary Time. Well if you go back to the Old Testament in this case, Isaiah 45 has been selected by the Church for the first reading. And in Isaiah 45:1-6, we read these words:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,

to subdue nations before him
and ungird the loins of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed:

And then it skips down to verse 4:

For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I gird you, though you do not know me,
that men may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;

So why does the lectionary choose this passage from Isaiah as background to Jesus's statements about giving the things to Caesar that belong to Caesar and giving the things that belong to God to God? Well I think the answer is actually quite significant because this is one of the most explicit passages in the Old Testament that affirms what we call monotheism. In other words, the idea that there is only one God, and that the Lord is God. And you will notice that in context there's that opening allusion to King Cyrus of Persia. Why is that there? Well, one of the reasons is because in ancient times, the kings, the emperors of these ancient empires, like Babylon and Medo-Persia and Assyria and Egypt, were often regarded as gods. They were considered to be divine figures. And so one of the things that God has to keep telling the Israelites in the Old Testament over and over again, is that I am God and the King is not. Even the most exalted Emperor, even the exalted King is, in a sense, a servant of the great King, the God of all, Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. So in this case that's the background to the riddle that Jesus gives in Matthew 22, because from the ancient times of Isaiah all the way to the first century, kings were still making the claim to be God. And yet the truth of the matter is that the Lord is above them all.

And if you have any doubts about that you can actually just see that that is the theme for the Responsorial Psalm as well. That's clearly the reason this passage from Isaiah was chosen, because the Responsorial Psalm in this case is Psalm 96. We will read a few verses from that so you can see what I am getting at. Psalm 96 begins in this way:

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.

And then in verse 4 it says:

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

Pause there. The Hebrew word for “the gods” is *Elohim*. It is actually the same word that you use for God himself. It is sometimes used in the singular and it is sometimes using in the plural. So it is almost kind of like a play on words here; that God, Elohim, the true God, is above all the other so-called gods, the other *elohim*, meaning the gods of the pagan nations. And in fact, verse five makes that clear because it says:

For all the gods of the peoples are idols;
but the LORD made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

In other words, the gods of the other nations are not the true God, because they're not the creators of the universe. They might actually, as the Greek translation of the Psalm tells us, be demons. So if you look at the Greek translation of Psalm 96, it doesn't say all the gods of the peoples are idols, it says all the gods of the peoples are demons. The Greek word there is *daimones*. This is going to lead to Paul's teaching later on in the New Testament, when he will say that when the pagans offer sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. This is because in Jewish

theology, the false gods of the pagan peoples weren't just like imaginary fictional characters, like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. In Jewish theology, the false gods of the pagan peoples were in fact demonic forces, demonic powers that the pagan peoples were in covenant with, in a sense, that they were bound to through their cults, through their sacrifices, through their their worship; some of which involved human sacrifice as well. So over and over again in the Bible, from the Old Testament all the way to the New, there's always this emphasis, this stress on the fact that the God of Israel, the God of the Jews, the God of the Israelites, isn't just one more deity amongst the nations of the world, the God of Israel is the creator God. He's the one true God. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. He is above all the other deities.

So with all that background in mind, we can ask ourselves, what then is the meaning of Jesus' riddle about the coin of Caesar for us today? What spiritual implications does it have for our lives? Well in this case I've already pointed out that this has been a constant proof text, a classic passage in the New Testament for enjoining Christians to live peaceably under the God-given authority of the state. And you can see this elsewhere in the New Testament, in Romans 13:1 and following, Paul will talk about the fact that the governing authorities have authority instituted by God. And then again in the the letters of Peter, 1 and 2 Peter, you'll see Peter enjoining Christians to pray for the Caesar, to pray for the Emperor. In other words, that they should ask God to bless their rulers and lead them to knowledge of the truth that they might be saved. But I would like to go a little further than that by drawing on one beautiful insight from a little bit later tradition, but still part of the tradition of the Church. St. Lawrence of Brindisi, he lived in the 17th century, the early 17th century; he has a comment on this passage and it is one of my favorite commentaries on the image of the coin. This is what he says about it, listen to St. Lawrence, who is one of the Doctors of the Church. St. Lawrence wrote this:

To each, he says, must be given what belongs to him. This, surely, is a judgment full of heavenly wisdom and instruction. For it teaches that authority is twofold, having an earthly and human aspect, and a heavenly and divine aspect. It teaches that we owe a twofold duty of obedience: to human laws and to the law of God. The coin bearing Caesar's likeness and inscription must be given to Caesar, and the one stamped with the divine

image and likeness must be given to God. We bear the imprint of your glorious face, O Lord. We are made in the image and likeness of God. So you, O Christian, because you are a human being, are God's tribute money — a little coin bearing the image and likeness of the divine emperor.²

Isn't that a beautiful image? It is fascinating, really powerful. Notice a couple things that he says there. First, the Christian's two-fold duty to obey human law and to obey divine law. But second, and even more, the idea that we, like the coin of Caesar, which had the face of Tiberius imprinted on it, we bear, in a sense, the face, the divine face of the Lord Jesus Christ. We bear his image. We bear his likeness. So that when we live and move and act in our lives, when people see us, they should see Christ. When people hear us, they should hear Christ. When they see us, they should see in us, in a sense, the face of Jesus. And although sometimes we might be tempted to think that we are not worth much, that we are just a penny so to speak, St. Lawrence says well you might just be a penny in the grand scheme of things, but you're a penny that bears the image of the divine Emperor. And so we belong to the one who is the Lord of the universe. So there is no reason for us to be afraid. There's no reason for us to be downcast. And even if we end up having to give all of our money to Caesar — which it can feel like some days — at the end of the day we have to give our lives, we have to give ourselves to God, who is the Lord of lords and the King of kings; and who is above all, not just the so-called gods of the world, but all the kings, all the presidents, all the rulers, all the emperors, and all the prime ministers, our Lord is the one who is exalted above them all. So our fidelity, above all, is to him and to his divine law, that we might live in this world and bear his image and likeness.

² Lawrence of Brindisi, Opera Omnia 8.336; trans. E. Barnecutt