

Render Unto Caesar



Render unto Caesar by Peter Paul Rubens

Matthew 22.17 "The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said . . . 'Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'"

After overturning the tables in the temple and chasing out the moneychangers with a whip, Jesus was cornered by the chief priests and elders of the people and, as we saw in the Gospel three weeks ago, he refused to answer their demand and declare by what authority he 'was doing these things'. Then Jesus told three parables back-to-back there in the temple, in which he plainly indicted the orthodox Jewish leaders of his day, who were watching

him closely. First in the parable of the two sons, from our Gospel lesson three weeks ago, the Jewish leaders are clearly depicted by Jesus as the son who said he would do his father's will and go work in the field, but didn't in the end do what he promised. Next in the parable of the wicked tenants, which we heard two weeks ago, the chief priests and the Pharisees were portrayed as those who refused to give the landlord his rightful share of the harvest, and from whom the landlord then took away their fields. We are even told then that the Jewish leaders were aware that Jesus was speaking against them, and after that they were looking for a way to arrest him, but were afraid of the crowd, who regarded Jesus as a prophet. And then last week we heard the parable of the great banquet, where the Jewish leaders were clearly condemned as the invited guests who had simply refused to come to the wedding of the king's son when everything was ready.

Now in today's Gospel we see the Jewish authorities pushing back a bit by sending in their disciples, along with some Herodians, seeking to entangle and trap Jesus in his teaching. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality," they began, with blatant insincerity. "Tell us, then, what you think," they go on, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" --- It is an obviously loaded question. It is obviously a trap. To answer 'yes'

would cause an uproar among the Jews in the crowd who bitterly resented paying tribute to their Roman oppressors. If Jesus answered 'yes' that they *should* pay taxes, the Jewish leaders knew that Jesus would lose his popular support and that the crowds would turn against him. But, if Jesus said 'no' and encouraged the crowd not to pay their taxes, then Jesus would be seen as a political revolutionary, who could be arrested right then and there by the temple guards, and then tried by the Romans for sedition. The question was apparently a no-win situation for Jesus, and everyone saw that, which is why Jesus' response is so clever, and so memorable.

So, taking a coin in his hand, Jesus said, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They said, "The emperor's." Then Jesus famously replied to them, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." And when the crowd heard this, they were amazed; simply astonished at his cleverness; and the Jewish leaders left him alone and went away.

Though they did come back at least twice more that day to further try and trick Jesus in his talk. The Sadducees came with a question about the resurrection, and the Pharisees came with a query about which law was the greatest, which is next week's Gospel. Jesus and the Jewish leaders therefore spent the whole day

in debate and accusation. And Jesus proved himself a most clever man in their midst.

But upon a more careful reflection, the Jews were probably not entirely satisfied with Jesus' answer in today's Gospel. Jesus may have escaped the trap that the Jewish leaders set for him, and everyone saw that, and everyone may have admired him for it, but Jesus didn't really tell the people what they wanted to hear. For they still, according to Jesus, had to render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's. They were still required to pay those burdensome taxes to their hated Roman oppressors. And the Jews didn't really want to pay tribute to those foreign invaders.

Jesus' answer, however clever we may think it to be, would also never have gotten him elected to public office in this country. For Jesus did not call for the lowering or elimination of taxes, nor did Jesus call for special deductions for the Jews. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," he simply said, when in fact the people didn't want to do that at all. They, like us, didn't really want to pay taxes. We want someone else to pay them; we want someone else to pay for the roads and the schools and the police, not us. The Jews in Jesus' audience, like us, resented their tax burden.

We all want to be like Tom Foley, who ran for Governor a few years ago, who owned a \$10 million dollar house in Greenwich, a \$5 million dollar yacht, and a \$1 million dollar plane, and yet for

two of the three years of his released tax returns, he didn't pay any income tax at all! Not a penny. How do you support a lifestyle like that and not pay any income tax? It's not fair. There's something not right about that, and yet still we all want to be like him; we too want to get away with paying as little as possible in taxes. He's just done a better job about it than us!

Moreover, not only did Jesus say that we ought to pay our taxes to the emperor, but he also added, "render therefore . . . to God the things that are God's." And those Jews didn't really want to hear that either. Those Jews were glad when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple and chased them out with a whip. They wanted to offer as little to God as they could possibly get away with. And we are really not much different from them. For though we repeat here each week the phrase from the Hebrew Scriptures that "All things come of thee O Lord," we don't really believe that, for our lives certainly don't reflect like that belief! Our lives suggest that that which we have, is really ours, not God's, and we will do with it what we want.

And none of us likes it when the Church comes around each year asking us to look carefully at our pledges, to determine exactly whether we have rendered unto God what is God's, because we know that we have often given God as little as possible, and certainly much less than is God's rightful share. Most of us have

fudged on our taxes and on our religious tithes. And there's something not right about that, as too many of us struggle to get away with returning as little as possible to God and to the Government, and wanting someone else to pay for all these things. No, Jesus' clever answer today was upon reflection not exactly what those Jews wanted to hear, nor what we really want to hear either!

For there is a basic human tendency in most of us to want to keep what is ours and not give it away to anyone, not to God or to the Government; and that urge or tendency to do so is the exact opposite of the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice, and it is the exact opposite of God's generous nature towards us. There is a propensity in most of us to believe that our wealth and our blessings are really ours, they're not God's, and we don't want to really share them with others. We want them for ourselves. And we don't want to hear suggestions about how we might cut back upon our own personal tastes and extravagance, so that others could share in our good fortune. We don't want to hear suggestions that we 'live simply so that others can simply live' as the saying goes. And there is certainly a general unwillingness among us to trust in God to provide for our needs, and to not lay up for ourselves treasures here on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves can break in and steal.

Jesus' clever answer in today's Gospel challenged those Jews, and it challenges us too, to be honest about our taxes to Caesar, and also to be honest about our giving to God. For we will all be called to give an account of what we have given one day, given from the many blessings that God has bestowed upon us, and we will all have fallen short, I imagine. Thus, with each passing year, the important question really is: are we becoming more honest with God, or less; are we becoming more generous year by year, or not? I think *that* is what may matter most, for as Jesus reminds us elsewhere, we cannot serve two masters. AMEN