

Loaded Question, Lasting Answer

Matthew 22:15-22

October 16, 2011

I.

We spend a lot of time organizing our lives, don't we? What do I do with this, and what do I do with that? How do I deal with these, and how do I deal with those? Do they go in this category or in that category? And so on.

And sometimes we find that the categories are not neat little boxes into which everything perfectly fits. Things are not always black and white. We also encounter gray areas. And sometimes they are in technicolor with virtually unlimited shades of choices and meaning.

Today's Gospel can raise those questions. Jesus said "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's. But how do we understand that? Which is which? For example, tell me something that belongs to the emperor but not to God.

And we could ask such a question in a contemporary setting. Worldly things and godly things. Secular things and spiritual things. Wouldn't it be great if there was a master list, and everything simply went into one column or the other?

But, of course, there is no such list. The lines we cross are sometimes blurred, and there can be confusion and uncertainty. We need help. That's why we pray. It's why we study Scripture. It's one of the reasons we worship God and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit. And it's why we support each other as a community of faith. Things are not always simple.

II.

Today's Gospel is that way. There are some underlying complexities related to the ongoing running battle between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders of the time, most notably the Pharisees. We remember this from other readings.

The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat to their own religious authority, and Jesus believed the Pharisees were unrighteously using their authority to subvert his teachings. The Gospels contain several examples of exchanges between them as the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus into saying something that could be used against him.

Our reading today begins in that way. But this story has a unique feature to it. The Pharisees who questioned Jesus were accompanied by "the Herodians."

The story says, "Then the Pharisees plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians." And these Pharisees and Herodians previously had conspired against Jesus (Mk. 3:6).

So, who were the Herodians? In short, they were Jews who were loyal to King Herod. We know from history that the Romans had conquered Judea, which now is part of modern-day Israel, and the Roman boot was firmly planted on the Jewish neck.

And the Roman emperor, who at this time was Tiberias Caesar, the grandson of Julius Caesar, had appointed Herod, who nominally was a Jew, as the Roman puppet ruler in the area. Herod called himself a king, but actually served at the pleasure of Rome as their own little dictator, and was not kind to his fellow Jews. As a result, most Jews thought of Herod as a traitor.

And, therefore, the Herodians were Jews who supported King Herod in hopes of gaining Roman favor, and also were despised by the general Jewish population as being disloyal.

But the conspiracy of Pharisees and Herodians served a purpose in today's reading. Everyone knew the Pharisees already disliked Jesus and their criticism would appear biased. So they cooked up a nefarious plan that included the Herodians to make it all seem reasonable.

III.

And that plan was to first say nice things about Jesus so they would look magnanimous. They also hoped this might catch Jesus off guard. And then they sprung their trap. They said "Tell us then, is it right to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

This was a loaded question, and let me explain why. The tax was a special poll tax only on Jewish people that Roman citizens did not have to pay. It was resented by the Jews, and there were even groups of Jewish people who refused to pay, at much risk to themselves.

In addition, the tax was paid in Roman money, which had the image of the emperor imprinted on it, which Jews thought was blasphemous because of the Second Commandment against idolatry.

And, to momentarily digress, you might ask why this was an issue. Aren't images of people on American money? The difference is ours all are dead. There are no living persons on our bills or coins. We do not worship them. And our government serves by consent of the people, not by conquest of the people.

So, the question, "Is it right to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" was intended to put Jesus in a dilemma with no way out. It was sort of "heads I win, tails you lose."

If Jesus said "yes, pay the tax," the Pharisees would go to the Jews and say Jesus supported this unpopular and hated tax, and the Herodians would confirm that Jesus said it. They thought this would hurt Jesus with the people among whom he was very popular.

And if he said "no, don't pay the tax," then the Herodians would go to the Romans and tell them Jesus was urging disobedience of Roman law, and the Pharisees would be there to back up the Herodians. This could make Jesus a criminal to the Romans.

Jesus, however, was too quick for them. He didn't answer the question they asked, and instead asked them to produce an example of the Roman money used to pay the tax.

And when they did, Jesus asked "Whose portrait is this? And whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's."

And then Jesus gave his memorable and frequently quoted answer. He said "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

IV.

But what does this mean? People sometimes use this reading to justify a separation between church and state. Or they say that Jesus was defining separate secular and religious realms. These ideas, however, are not supported by the story, and both are oversimplifications.

Jesus might have recognized the reality of Roman occupation, but he did not approve it. He was not speaking of how to relate to governments in the world, but how to relate to God in the world.

And we know that both exist together, and in tension. But both are not equal. Jesus never said, and the Bible does not say, that God takes second place, or that God does not matter in certain situations. God always matters in everything we do in every situation.

We always are called to live Christian lives. And if Christians are elected to public office they still are called to live Christian lives. Nothing about a certificate of election supersedes the Bible. And nothing about an oath of office supersedes baptismal vows. Separation of church and state, whatever that means, does not mean separation of God and state.

And you also know, from the sermons I have given on fourth of July weekends, that I believe this so-called doctrine of separation of church and state has been falsely constructed, and never was intended to operate as is currently is applied to drive God from the public forum.

So, nothing in Jesus' words supports the idea that things can belong to the emperor apart from God's creation. The emperor, like ourselves, is a steward of what God has provided. The emperor has nothing over which God has no claim.

All things were given to us, and to the emperor figuratively speaking, through God's grace. And we give back to God from those things as we respond in thankfulness for our blessings.

V.

And God gives us choices as we use the things that are his. It is our responsibility to choose wisely and live as Christian disciples in a confusing and chaotic world. We are called to oppose evil and maintain a just society insofar as we are able. We are called to love God and our neighbors, to support our communities, and to be good citizens.

But after having done all that there still are times when we simply have to trust in God. And at those times we are called to know that every day God gives us is a gift, and today is one of those days. [Cue]

[Amazing Praisers flash mob rises from the congregation in three successive groups at the beginning of each of the first three verses of "This Is The Day," LEVAS II 219, with all singing the last verse.]

Amen! That certainly was inspiring and refreshing, wasn't it? And it was our first St. Thomas flash mob, a spontaneous expression of joy that might happen again.

Indeed, this is the day. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. And let us truly trust God in those times when life gets tough, or circumstances become difficult, or the light threatens to give way to darkness.

And then we will find that the bumpy roads that emperors place before us will give way to a smoother one of God's design. Then we will know that we can do God's work in the emperor's world. *Amen.*