



**Proper 29, Year A – October 16, 2011**

Matthew 22.15-22

**A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker**

This is one of those famous biblical sayings which is so much a part of our cultural vocabulary that it gets quoted by all kinds of people who don't even know Jesus is the one who said it! And because it is so well known, we mostly assume we know what Jesus meant by it. But, as is often the case when we pluck wisdom from its context, we do violence to the wisdom, and mess up its meaning.

Typically, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's," is treated as a divine warrant for the separation of Church and State. In other words, it means, let the government get on with the business of governing, and let the church stick to its prayers. It sounds harmless enough, in theory. But it wasn't harmless in Nazi Germany, was it? -- where countless Protestant Christians averted their eyes, and thereby gave tacit consent to the Final Solution. It wasn't harmless in El Salvador, where the clergy preferred to keep company in the corridors of power, to speaking out against the exploitation of their desperately impoverished people. It isn't harmless when Christians refuse to measure social, economic, military or environmental policy against Jesus' vision for the kingdom of God. And by the same token, it isn't harmless when governments dismiss dissent as the unwelcome murmurings of a bunch of cranks (religious or otherwise).

And yet, again and again, "Render unto Caesar" has been taken to mean that religion and politics should have no truck with each other. .

Is this what Jesus meant? Let's go back and see.

We are in Chapter 22 of Matthew's gospel, days away from Jesus' crucifixion. Two days ago he had won the adoration of the crowds as he entered Jerusalem on the back of a humble ass. The day after that he'd made a scene in the temple, storming in with a whip of cords and upending the tables of the moneychangers. And here he is today, if you please, having the gall to go straight back to the temple, as if nothing had happened, and start teaching again. You can just imagine the conspiratorial whispering in the corners – Herodians and Pharisees, for heaven's sake! – natural enemies making common cause to rid themselves of this Jesus.

This is the backdrop, when they come to Jesus with their disingenuous fawning accolades, and their trick question: Rabbi, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? The Herodians, of course, are supporters of Herod, the Roman puppet king, and their own view is that, of course, such taxes are to be paid. The Pharisees, on the other hand, view the Roman tribute tax as punitive and religiously unlawful. So it doesn't matter what Jesus says: he's going to get it wrong. If he agrees with the Pharisees that the tax should be withheld, the Herodians will charge him with sedition. If he agrees with the Herodians that the tax should be paid, he will lose the support of the crowd, who hated the tax. Either way – or so the conspirators think – Jesus loses.

Here then is the first point to be made: the *topic* of this argument (i.e. whether taxes should or shouldn't be paid) is not really what this story is about. Rather, Matthew is trying to show how Jesus confounded his adversaries, how deftly he plays both ends against the middle. Jesus is fighting for his life here! The last thing on his mind is to be sure he gets off one more good quote for Bartlett's

Familiar Quotations. As religious teachers go, in fact, Jesus shows himself entirely willing to wade into the political fray – including submitting to a trial before Pontius Pilate. To imagine that he is now trying to drive a wedge between the two makes no sense.

But if this is so, how else might we read this encounter?

The key lies in the coin Jesus is shown.

Remember how, just the day before, Jesus had overthrown the tables of the moneychangers? These men weren't just cashiers, making change on large bills. They functioned more like a *currency exchange*. In order to purchase an animal for sacrifice in the temple, a worshipper could not use money which was imprinted with the head and title of Caesar Augustus. Augustus had proclaimed himself the divine Son of God, the Prince of Peace. To a Jew this was nothing short of blasphemy, and any coin bearing the image and title of Caesar was a clear violation of the first two commandments: You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself any graven image. So the role of the money changers was to exchange the worshippers' Roman coins for plain unstamped coins, which they could then use to purchase their sacrificial offering. What had made Jesus so angry was the handsome premium they charged for their services.

Many devout Jews avoided the issue altogether, however, and as a matter of principle, by refusing to use the Roman coinage for any purpose at all.

Knowing this, listen again to the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians.

*"Tell us," they say, "is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.*

And they reach into their pocket and they hand him a silver denarius – not a *plain* silver denarius, mind you, which is what you might have expected of people who were "holier than thou" – but a coin *bearing the image of Caesar Augustus, and proclaiming him the Divine Son of God.*

Jesus really doesn't have to say anything – he has won this argument before he even opens his mouth. But just to make the point, he says, "And whose image is this? And whose title?... Well, then. You people seem to have made your decision already. You've declared for Caesar. Why ask me? You've made your own bed: you sleep in it."

Or, put another way, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.