

Disturb us O Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little/ when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to shore/..Disturb us O Lord to dare more boldly/To venture on wider seas where storms can show your mastery/Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars...Amen

Give therefore to the Emperor's the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's....

One advantage (or disadvantage) about the current political campaign is that I get mail and phone calls from people I have never met. And they all want to be my friend.....

Mike Jacob, Barack Obama and John McCain have been particularly persistent the last few weeks.....and of course, my new friends are always sending letters asking for financial support.

Believe it or not, even Sarah Palin got into the act and dropped me a letter last Friday. (This must have been before her Saturday Night Live appearance.)

Certainly the desire of our prospective leaders to garner our support (and our money) fits in well with our gospel lesson's emphasis on politics, religion, and taxes.

And it should not surprise any of us that even after 2,000 years Christians still wrestle with questions of what properly belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God.

But before going further I do want to offer two quick reflections for discussing religion and politics.

First, I do not believe our passage from Matthew asks Christians to divide questions about religion and politics into separate categories.

The modern western mind loves compartmentalization.

We like filing cabinets and folders marked A through Z. But we should resist the urge to mark some files in our lives as belonging only to Caesar and other ones as only belonging to God.

NT Wright a noted New Testament Scholar in his book, *Jesus and The Victory of God*, says this about the events of holy week, “it is futile to try and separate theology from politics. The tired old split between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith was never more misleading than at this point.”

To delve deeper into our gospel story, we must accept the fact that Jesus’ life and death cannot be divorced from the politics of his day. Jesus was both a religious and a political figure.

My second reflection might seem a bit more radical. While our current form of government has many positive qualities, (fundraising letters being the exception). American Christians must be careful that our patriotism does turn into worship of the state.

Christians for the past 2,000 years have lived under many different types of governments.

Some were oppressive, some were enlightened, some were good and some were very bad. We are fortunate that our current form of government allows religious freedom.

But Christians should remember that our constitution was a written by human beings.

And like most other empires in human history it will someday probably pass away.

Jesus never confused his loyalty to God with the establishment of the nation of Israel.

Christians in any age should be on their guard to insure they do not confuse the present world with the world that is to come. As we say each week in the Lord's Prayer, Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be Done.

Now back to our morning's gospel and the question that Jesus is asked.

First, Matthew tells us that two different groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians have come to inquire about the legitimacy of paying taxes to the Emperor.

Normally these two groups would have detested each other. The Herodians were collaborators with the Romans.

They were willing to forego the rigidity of observing Jewish law for the sake of retaining political and religious power under military occupation.

The Pharisees while not advocates of violent revolution, like the zealots, were loyal to Judaism and God first.

They represented the common folk, living under military oppression but still endeavoring to live a life of faithfulness to God and the Torah.

That these traditional enemies have come together to question Jesus must have been surprising to him.

But even 2,000 years ago politics occasionally make strange bedfellows and both groups are worried about the potential that Jesus' teaching has for upsetting the social order.

Like most good politicians the Pharisees and Herodians start out trying to butter Jesus up, "Teacher we know you are sincere and teach God's way truthfully and do not sacrifice your beliefs for political favor."

But then they get to the real heart of the matter, "Is it, they ask him, lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not? "

When they use the word, "lawful" they mean according to the Torah, the Jewish law not the civil law of Rome. The Herodians and Pharisees already knew the civil penalty for not paying your taxes. They wanted Jesus to give them religious justification.

If Jesus says that a good Jew should support the Roman State, then he would have allied himself with a foreign power that was occupying Israel and killing Jews.

This answer would have alienated the Pharisees and given implicit approval to a state that regarded its ruler as a god.

To religious Jews going along with paying taxes to Rome would have been the ultimate form of idolatry.

This idolatry was reinforced on each Roman coin. One side would have deified the emperor as "son of the Divine Augustus" and the other side would have honored him as Pontifex Maximus or chief priest.

Both sides of the coin capture the claim of the Roman emperor's to absolute civil and religious authority.

To monotheistic Jews this claim would have been religiously offensive and politically humiliating, a reminder that as occupied people they were forced to pay taxes and support a pagan man masquerading as a false god.

This is one reason I suspect, that Jesus asked for his questioners to show him the coin.

For a pious Jew to have a coin like this in his possession was a violation of Jewish law.

Remember in the 10 Commandments the part about making or worshiping graven images....

But when Jesus says to both groups, *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's* his answer is a two edged sword.

And this brings us back to my two earlier points about how we can be tempted to misunderstand this passage.

Jesus knew that questions about paying taxes could not be separated into political or religious questions. They were one and the same.

Every Sabbath in fact as an observant Jew, Jesus would have recited the following words from the Shema, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

There is no other commitment more important than this.

And properly understood there really is no real distinction to Jesus' answer. God created the world and all that is in it. The Emperor has nothing that God has not given to him on loan.

While this blasphemous coin belongs to the emperor and one day this so-called “god” is going to get what he deserves and even his empire will pass away.

For Christians the offertory sentences, All things come from thee, O Lord, and of thine own have given thee, captures this basic understanding.

It is an affirmation that all that we have, possess and claim to be our own ultimately belongs to God.

And a “whole God” demands the service of “whole human being”, a God we love with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind.

So if God demands all of our human life, what is left to render to the emperor? Nothing that does not first belong to God.

And while different emperor’s images on coins will come and go, it is God’s image that is indelibly imprinted upon our lives.

You are, as it says in our baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. AMEN