

## OUR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES: 29<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY A

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*'To avoid arguments,'* people tell us, *'don't ever talk about religion or politics.'* In real life, though, it's not possible to leave them out of conversation altogether. Our gospel story today illustrates this.

It may come as a shock that the good, the great, the kind, the loving, the merciful, the compassionate, the fair-minded and forgiving Jesus, could make so many enemies. Yet bit by bit more and more people turned against him and even hated him. Today we meet two groups of them - the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were totally opposed and hostile to the occupation of their native land by the Romans, to their cruel and brutal rule, and to having to pay tax to Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor at that time.

On the other hand, the Herodians, for their own ends, together with their puppet king Herod, *'crawled'* to and collaborated with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and with his army. While both sides hated each other, they hated Jesus even more, and each of them had scores to settle. In this episode, we find them hanging out together and ganging up on Jesus. It's another instance of the saying that *'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'*.

Their plan is to entrap Jesus, to catch him out and bring charges against him, and in the long run to get rid of him. Once and for all! Their opening statement is both true and clever. They praise Jesus for his honesty and integrity, for always telling it like it is without fear or favour. But after the flattery of their introduction, they go in for the kill by asking him this seemingly straightforward question: *'Teacher, is it allowed to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'*

It was a loaded question, something like that old chestnut, *'Have you stopped beating your wife?'* If Jesus were to say that the tax should not be paid, he would be agreeing with the Pharisees. But then they would report him to the Roman occupiers for treason, and have him arrested. On the other hand, if he said the tax should be paid, he would be agreeing with the Herodians. But this would be at the cost of finding himself totally alienated from, and completely offside with, his own people. For they believed that they had only one Lord and Ruler, and that was their God! So either way, Jesus finds himself in a sticky *'no-win'* situation.

He is well aware of the malice and insincerity of their question, but also of the danger of giving them a straight answer. So in a very ingenious way he answers these hypocrites with a question of his own: *'Let me see the money you pay the tax with,'* he says, *'whose head is on the coin, and whose name is in the inscription around its edge?'* *'Caesar's,'* they answer. This gives Jesus the perfect chance to turn back to them the responsibility for answering their own question. *'Very well,'* he goes on, *'give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.'* He is saying in other words, *'don't look to me to settle your alleged taxation issue. It's up to you to work out and decide, what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God.'*

The answer Jesus gave should not be taken to mean that we have no responsibilities in relation to our local, state and federal governments. In truth, in a democracy like ours, they represent us. To deny having any responsibility to the ruling power is to take the line of anarchists. On the other hand, no civil power has the right to require the complete submission of the persons they govern. They do not have absolute authority over their people. They are accountable to their people and they are accountable to God. In their dealings with their citizens they must therefore respect the requirements of truth, fairness, integrity, justice and decency. Where they fail to do so, there must be consequences.

In the name of truth, justice and charity, we are entitled to criticize and protest the actions or non-actions of our governments, whenever they violate human dignity, our own or that of others. When people really love their country and its people, they sometimes have to show strong opposition. The protests around Australia against the inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers reflect this need, concern and commitment. In South Africa's apartheid system many good people found they had to disobey the immoral laws of the state. In the USA, both black and white people found they had to oppose and disobey the unjust laws of segregation operating in some of the southern states. As St Thomas More, a famous dissident and martyr put it: *'I am the king's good servant, but God's first of all.'*

We are all citizens of two kingdoms: citizens of the political territory where we belong and citizens of the kingdom of God. As Jesus says, they both require our loyalty. We all depend to a large extent on our civil governments. Very few if any of us can supply our own water, electricity and telecommunications. We look to our civil governments for education, hospitals and roads, and for welfare services for the unemployed, the handicapped and the elderly, etc. It's

obvious that these services will continue and improve only through the cooperation and support of the community at large.

For the most part we give this support through paying taxes. Taxes are not, as they are sometimes misrepresented, necessary evils. They are our contributions to making available the community services and benefits we may take for granted. In a just tax system, we help to spread more evenly the wealth of the community, so that every member of the community has access to what is needed for a life of integrity, human dignity and contentment. It's a matter, as the Three Musketeers put it, of being *'all for one and one for all'*.

There's just so much wisdom, then, in that famous reply which Jesus gave: *'... give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.'* So, let's take it to heart!

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