

How often do we hear it said to not mix religion with politics? Perhaps we have said that ourselves many times. But such a statement misses the point that we are all political animals. Politics is in our nature, although the very word means many different things to different people. In today's gospel Jesus is put to the test around the issue of his allegiance to the emperor insofar as the paying of taxes was concerned. It is curious to see who it was that joined forces in this laying of a trap for Jesus. We are quite familiar by now with the Pharisees for they often engage with Jesus about the close following of the laws and regulations as written in the Torah. Jesus, for example, on one occasion had to explain to these strict constructionists that the Sabbath was made for Man and not Man for the Sabbath. The Pharisees had had it with Jesus and had been plotting for some time for ways to be rid of him. Their primary concern was upholding the Jewish law. They rejected out of hand the paying of taxes to the emperor but one of their primary motivations was the iconography of the money used to pay the tax. By paying the denarius to Caesar, they would be acquiescing in the Roman's belief that Caesar was divine. The Herodians, on the other hand, had no

problem with Caesar or the Romans as they were followers of Herod, who had been appointed by the Romans to govern Judaea. These two groups would hardly find themselves in the same room, much less cooperating on anything, but they each had their reasons to do away with this troublesome Galilean. And so they conspired together to get Jesus in some serious trouble.

If Jesus were to agree that taxes should be paid to Caesar, that would alienate his Jewish listeners and their chief priests and elders. If he were to object to the paying of the tax, he would be guilty of sedition. As usual, however, Jesus foils their perfectly laid traps. Render to Caesar, he tells them, what belongs to Caesar. Render to God what belongs to God. Caesar's image is on the denarius owed to him but God's image is on our very person and our very humanity. God's claim on us supersedes anyone else's claims. The Romans established a remarkable infrastructure throughout the empire. You can still see vestiges of it throughout Europe and the Near East. As part of my studies at the international house in Canterbury we paid a visit to the Roman port where St. Augustine landed on the British

Isles when he first arrived. The fort, or the ruins still left today, is remarkably well preserved all these centuries later. Part of the building of those roads and baths and public buildings was no doubt made possible by the levying of taxes on all the peoples brought into the Roman empire. But while Caesar can tax his subjects, he cannot lay claim on anyone's soul or intrinsic worth as a human person.

Today we also are of different minds when it comes to the levying of taxes. Some of us will support some government expenditures but not others. Some will limit their support to a president depending on political partisan affiliation. Others may even limit such support based on race or gender.

We are citizens of a nation state while at the same time committed to a Christ who calls us into His Reign, a Reign with distinctive values embodied by the life of Jesus. We have dual citizenships as it were. We are called to render to the government our share of the burden of providing for the common good. We are also called to live our lives as Jesus did, with a preferential option and love for the poor.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? This is not simply a question of economics or politics or even just dual citizenship. It is essentially a question of conscience. It is a question of what to do when allegiance to Caesar conflicts with our allegiance to Christ. It is a question of what to do when the God we serve and the government to which we have sworn allegiance are pulling us into a situation of divided loyalties.

Jesus did not answer the question posed him in a way that placed him at risk with either group. Instead, he answered in a way that places believers in the position of having to balance their responsibilities as citizens of both an earthly realm and a spiritual realm.

Perhaps we suspect the presence of present-day Pharisees or Herodians in our midst, folks who are so committed to their ideological agenda that they have it coincide with their Christian identity? If we were to live our lives as Father Bill suggested last week that we might, as welcomers of others, no matter how different they are from us, would we not be closer to the Way of Jesus? Or are we perhaps in danger of being called hypocrites by Jesus, who rather than being impressed

with how well the Pharisees “knew their religion,” chastised them because they failed to recognize God’s Anointed One, and anointed ones, in their midst. For we are all marked with the seal of God, and God, too, is marked by each of God’s creatures. In chapter 49 of Isaiah we read, “Can a woman forget her nursing child? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.”

Let us more closely consider the exact words Jesus used in this passage. The question was whether one should give (didomi) tribute to Caesar, but Jesus answer spoke of giving back (paradidomi) as if one already owed something. Though we often see the use of the word “render” as the action required of us, the words Jesus actually used are thought to have been “give back” to Caesar what is due Caesar and give back to God what is due God. This then puts the argument in the realm of the Old Testament’s understanding of justice, that of giving back to everyone what is due to them. It includes the sense of jubilee, where even the land returns to its original owners every fifty years. The Old Testament prophets speak of justice as that which requires us to

return the blanket or coat to the beggar at night even when he has bartered it away during the day in exchange for a meal. For every child of God is due his or her basic human rights, as these are given to each by God.

And so Jesus is saying that, yes, we render, or give back, to Caesar, or government, that which is due for needed goods and services. That form of loyalty is appropriate. But what kind of loyalty is appropriate in relation to our God, our Creator who sustains us and pours his blessings on us at every moment? If God has given us all that we are and have, then we are bound in justice to give back to God some gratitude, loyalty and service. The central act of Christian worship is this Eucharist which gathers us each Sunday. Eucharist is the giving of thanks. It is basically a question of paying back the gratitude we owe to God.

Christians must together discern whether and to what extent a given government and its policies merits their loyalty and support. But total and absolute loyalty and service is a debt that we owe to God and God alone.

Amen.