

Sunday, October 18, 2026
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24A)

Matthew 22.15-22

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“The Image We Bear”

There is a mistaken notion that the Church is not allowed to get political in its message. Perhaps partially due to a misunderstanding of the First Amendment of our Constitution and of two specific clauses contained therein: the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. The Establishment Clause prohibits the government from establishing a state-sponsored religion. And the Free Exercise Clause protects the citizens' right to practice their religion as they wish, providing the practice does not run afoul of “public morals” or a “compelling” governmental interest.¹ Other restrictions are actually policies of the Internal Revenue Service, which have largely been eliminated under the current administration. While neither the Establishment Clause nor the Free Exercise Clause are biblical, today’s Gospel reading is about the closest scriptural support you will find for these principles. Demonstrating in no uncertain terms that Jesus was decidedly political. And in so doing, providing justification for how we as followers of Christ and how the Church as the Body of Christ, are called to be political.

I know there are some that start to get nervous, even anxious, when such topics come up in a sermon. Equating politics with partisanship, which is where things generally go in our national political discourse. But I merely preach what scripture gives us. And today, Jesus gives us, “Give . . . to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Establishing clear distinctions regarding our relationship to both church and state. I submit there is nothing to get nervous about in following that injunction. While it is most certainly a political statement on Jesus’ part, it is certainly not partisan. In fact, Jesus deliberately crafts this statement to be non-partisan, as we shall see. So, let’s all take a deep breath and take a look at what Jesus is really getting at in today’s Gospel.

First, it will not go unnoticed by some that this particular reading, while a mere happenstance of how the lectionary is arranged, bumps up against the realities of secular life. At least in our own nation. This particular Gospel coming right in the thick of election season, in the run-up to the midterms in 16 days. A time when our nation is engaged in yet another polarizing election, complete with controversies and conflicting perspectives on a variety of topics. With money, corruption, and governmental authority being at the top of the list. And depending on where one lives, all this with a veneer of religion to further complicate matters. Topics that are addressed to one degree or another in today’s Gospel.

Fortuitous timing as we have all likely received our ballots in the mail and are in the throes of trying to discern how we will vote for a variety of federal, state, and local offices, as well as a myriad of state and local propositions. To guide us, we have a Gospel reading that does two things. First, it specifically emphasizes our responsibility to engage in the body politic, to exercise our rights and responsibilities with respect to secular government. And second, provides guidance as to just how we are to exercise those rights and responsibilities in our lives in general, and at the ballot box in particular.

Just to remind us of where we are in the Gospel, for the last few weeks we have observed Jesus in the final days before his Passion and death. In the Gospel timeline, this is Monday of Holy Week. And just to recap—as this is particularly germane to what we hear today—the day before today’s account, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem: Palm Sunday. The first thing he does is go to the temple where he has an altercation referred to as the cleansing of the temple. “Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers’” (Mt 21.12-13).

The next day—today in the Gospel timeline—he comes back to the temple and teaches the assembled crowd and engages in some spirited dialogue with the temple authorities. Part of that dialogue was designed by the authorities to lure Jesus into blasphemy, questioning by what authority he “did these things.” Unsuccessful in achieving their aims, the Pharisees come back for a second go, this time bringing some Herodians with them. For clarification—and this is incredibly important to today’s Gospel encounter—the Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas, the local king who served as Rome’s puppet ruler in Palestine. Herod and his followers being collaborators with the Roman Empire. Now, admittedly, the coming together of the Pharisees and the Herodians makes for strange bedfellows. The Pharisees were against the Roman occupation. As a result, they had little in common with the Herodians. Except for one thing. They shared a mutual opposition to Jesus, to the trouble he was stirring up among the people, and to the increasing support of the people. Support that was proving to undermine the authority of both the Pharisees and the Herodians. Both had incentive to get rid of Jesus. As a result, the Pharisees and the Herodians—the church and the state, respectively—violating their own equivalent of the separation of church and state, and coming together for common purposes.

They hatch a deceptively simple, yet elegant means to do so. One simple question of Jesus: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” A question which will, no matter how Jesus answers, provide justification for putting him away. If Jesus says it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he will offend the Pharisees, as well as—and more importantly—the crowds, who are fiercely opposed to the Roman occupation. Those for whom paying imperial taxes was viewed as a sign of support for, of collusion with, the empire. In which case, he would lose all credibility, likely be run out of town on a rail, if not actually assaulted and even stoned by the crowds. If Jesus says it is not lawful to pay the taxes, he will offend the Herodians—those who support and collude with the empire. In which case they would undoubtedly report him to the imperial authorities for sedition and treason. He would then be arrested and likely executed. This simple question raises, therefore, a no win situation for Jesus.

And yet, in true Jesus-fashion, he is able to craft a response that technically answers the question in a way that cannot be disputed by the Pharisees or the Herodians while putting the kibosh on their attempts to discredit him. And in a way that holds a deeper theological message, not only for those of Jesus’ time, but also for those of us who struggle with our own modern-day equivalent of “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” As we struggle with our own personal responses to the often-conflicting demands of living under both church and state.

Jesus' response, as we heard, is to first ask to see a coin used for the payment of taxes. They produce a denarius, the official coin of the empire. He then asks whose image and whose title is on the coin. To which they respond, "The emperor's." While this response is true and conveys what is needed for Jesus to make his point, there is actually a little more to it than that. At that time, under the rule of Emperor Tiberius, the front of the coin would have had an image of Tiberius, with words that translate as, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, [himself] Augustus." A proclamation of the perceived divinity of the emperor. And the back of the coin would have had an inscription meaning "Highest Priest." A mockery to temple authority. Under Jewish law, this would have been considered a graven image. A violation of the Ten Commandments. To have such an image in the courts of the temple would have been considered sacrilege. To be blasphemous. Remember, just the day before, Jesus had turned over the tables of the money changers—those who exchanged the denarius, the coin of the empire, for the shekel, the coin of the temple. Namely so that sacrifices could be purchased without bringing the sacrilegious Roman money into the temple. And here, the Pharisees and Herodians are in the temple, with money that violates the sanctity of the temple. Not only that, a sign of the temple authorities' own hypocrisy in relying on Roman money for their own operation. Busted! Jesus let's this visual speak for itself. He simply responds, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Sit with that for a moment.

Although over the years, that message has been interpreted to mean that "the things that are God's"—that are of interest to God—have nothing to do with money or taxes or government. That God's interests are exclusively spiritual. Never mind the fact that God created all that is, including the physical. That Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh. Be that as it may, it is the spiritual-physical divide that Jesus relies on to wiggle his way out of the trap posed in the question as to the lawfulness of paying taxes. That is certainly how the Herodians hear his response. Sure, pay taxes to the emperor. But it's the other half of the answer, the part about "giving to God the things that are God's," which does the heavy lifting.

To get this, we need to read between the lines. Jesus tells the crowd, as well as the Herodians and Pharisees, to give the emperor what rightly belongs to him, and to give to God what rightly belongs to God. He separates these two out in the use of an image. What belongs to the emperor is denoted by that which bears the image of the emperor: the denarius. The implication is that, if what belongs to the emperor bears the emperor's image, then that which belongs to God must similarly bear the image of God. And what bears the image of God?

We do. Human beings. As we hear in the creation narrative in Genesis, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them" (Gen 1.27). If we are to give to God that which bears the image of God, then we are to give everything else that is not the emperor's. We are to give our whole lives to God, in the sense that we are to participate in God's mission, listening to and faithfully living according to God's commandments. The greatest and all-encompassing being, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22.37-40). That pretty much sums up what belongs to God. Words that Jesus would speak later that day in yet another spirited

discussion with the temple authorities. Words that we will hear in the Gospel reading next week.

In his response to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” one commentator notes that “Jesus isn’t dividing the world up into ‘financial’ vs. ‘spiritual,’ or ‘political’ vs. ‘religious.’ He’s pointing out that ‘the things that are God’s’ amounts to a much, much bigger category, encompassing finance, community, and virtually everything else: our bodies, our actions, our lives, and our life together with each other.”²

In his exchange with the Pharisees and the Herodians, Jesus is most certainly political—political as in pertaining to matters necessary to the functioning of our collective society—without taking a partisan position. Without siding with either the Pharisees or the Herodians. He is able to find a middle ground that effectively navigates the thorny issue of the day while addressing the concerns of both sides. In so doing, he sends a clear message that as citizens of a secular society, we are to have loyalty to and fulfil our responsibilities to the state. However, our highest loyalty, our greatest responsibility, is to the one whose image we bear. Our highest loyalty, our greatest responsibility, is to God and that which is of greatest concern to God. As such, our loyalties, and the guiding principle of our lives, even in exercising secular responsibilities, such as voting, is ultimately not partisan ideologies but the commandments which guide our lives as the People of God and as members of the Body of Christ. That all we do, even in the exercise of our secular responsibilities, must ultimately be informed by and reflect the image we bear.

¹ <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/first-amendment-and-religion>

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/12/jesus-and-the-2020-election-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost>