

October 18, 2020

Is 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thes 1:1-5b; Mt 22:15-21

We have received many gifts from God. There is the gift of our lives, the many things that we don't realize have been sprinkled in our path by God, and the other resources that we have at our disposal. But there is also another gift - the privilege of being Jesus' partners in this world to bring comfort, justice, peace, assistance, and love to others. We are all bound to each other in a network of responsibility - God provides for us and allows us to partner with Jesus to care for all people, as we are cared of too.

In this network we can't expect to always be the one who receives and not contribute, and the state has a role to play, like do we. As I drive around in winter on plowed roads, as I take comfort that the Fire and Police Departments will come when I call, as I see the work done by humans service agencies funded by the State - I am aware of some of what my tax dollars pay for. However, I am also aware of injustice, corruption and waste in government, and may wonder: What could I do with all that money if I didn't send it to the government?

In the Gospel we see people use a tax question trying to trap Jesus. Two groups that didn't get along well team up to get him: Pharisees (who looked down the payment of taxes as being more loyal to the Romans than to God), and the Herodians (who were a political group who were Roman sympathizers who cared more about politics than God). They pose a question and give Jesus two possible responses: *Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?* If he says "yes," the Pharisees will paint him as a lackey of the oppressing Roman authorities who are pagans and this will make him look unreligious. If he says "no," then the Herodians will report him to the Romans as a seditionist (and the Romans will crush him for starting rebellion).

Jesus turns the whole situation on it's head. He asks for a coin - they hand him a Roman Denarius. Funny thing is that they had the coin that is used to pay the tax in their pocket - indicating that as much as the Pharisees thought supporting the Romans was evil, they still paid their taxes. What is more, on this coin, Caesar is proclaimed to be a God, which makes them possessors of a graven image of a pagan God. Jesus exposes their hypocrisy. This whole things is not about a religious question, it is not even really about making him show his loyalty to God or the state - it's just a game they are using - not realizing how important the question really is.

So why did the Pharisees pay the tax if they didn't want to - the same reason many of us do - fear of the government coming after us (the IRS can be about as friendly as a Roman soldier on a rampage). They were willing to place aside their religious objections to the tax, and also suspend the prohibition of having pagan images on them to appease the state. So who was first in their life, God or State? Jesus offers a simple solution to the question: *Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God*. When Jesus asks about the coin: *Whose image is this and whose inscription?* he is referring to the imprint on the coin. This same word is used in Genesis when we hear that we are made in the image and likeness of God. The word means an imprint of a shape into something like a die makes an imprint on a coin. Our souls are marked by that image of God - to ask the question about ourselves: *Whose image is this and whose inscription?* - the answer would be God's. Jesus does not oppose the payment of taxes - he is basically saying "go ahead and give Caesar the tax, but don't forget to give to God what is marked by God" - that is - our deeper selves.

We need to pray that the civil government to whom we pay taxes will use these to do God's work. God is the giver of all authority, and we must pray to insure that the civil leaders act as God would have them for the good of the people - and we must speak up when they act unjustly. This way, our tax dollars entrusted to them do the work of God - whether or not the people know there is a God. For ourselves, and our actions we have to give our own energies, our own resources, and our deepest allegiance to God. It is not that I pay my taxes to the State, I fulfill obligations to the State (because human law says I have to) and the rest is mine. Giving to God what is God's involves giving some of what God has given us for others - not just because it is the right things to do - that's an answer that any atheist could also give - but because it is doing the work of the God in whose image we have been made. God doesn't send the IRS after us, if we slack, he wants it to be a labor of love. St. Paul says: *unceasingly [call] to mind your work of faith and labor of love, and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

The greater point is to see that the plan of God to care for all people is achieved. Both by giving to the State (and demanding that they respect the God who gave them that authority), and also by giving our deepest allegiance and ourselves to that work of God - in this way we follow Jesus' command: *Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God*.