

# Father Ed's Sunday Reading

**(continued)**

Today, in the first of four challenges by different leaders, they hit back. Their plan was to get Jesus to discredit himself. The first challenge, in today's Gospel, comes from the Pharisees. Their deviousness is seen in the delegation they sent – a mixture of their disciples (not themselves) and some Herodians.

It was a strange mixture because Pharisees and Herodians were bitterly opposed to each other. The Pharisees were rabid nationalists and totally anti-Roman; the Herodians were willing to collaborate with the Romans hoping to benefit from it. In the language of today, they would be called “appeasers” or “fellow travelers”. It was a perfect example of the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Both sides hated each other but they hated Jesus even more and both had scores to settle. Or did they hope by sending such a mixed delegation that Jesus would be thrown off the scent of their real purpose?

Their opening statement is clever and very flattering. They praise the utter honesty and integrity of Jesus. All of which was perfectly true. Jesus, in fact, is being praised as endowed with God's own sense of truth and justice, totally impartial, with perhaps a bias for the poor, the weak and powerless.

And it is precisely in this strength of Jesus – telling it like it is without fear or favour – that they hope to entrap him.

After this flattering softening up and linguistic foreplay comes the apparently straightforward question: “Is it against our Law to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” In fact, this seemingly simple question turned on a red-hot issue. Palestine was a colony of Rome, a very unwilling and troublesome colony. The Jews hated the Romans, hated their brutality, their moral corruption, above all their godlessness. So, the nationalistic Pharisees felt that the taxes should not be paid to the oppressor. It was, one might say, an early version of “No taxation without representation”. On the contrary, for the Herodians, collaboration with the Romans was seen as beneficial.

It was a loaded question, something like the old chestnut “Have you stopped beating your wife?” If Jesus said taxes should not be paid, he would have pleased the Pharisees but they could report him for sedition and have him arrested. If he said taxes should be paid he might please the Herodians but almost certainly he would lose all credibility with his own people.

The Jews believed that they had only one Lord and Ruler and that was their God. Taxes, or any form of submission, should only be made to him, by offerings made in God's Temple. So today's First Reading from Isaiah makes it clear that Cyrus, one of the great kings of antiquity with enormous power and who had made vassals of the Jews, was seen as never more than an agent doing God's work.

Jesus, of course, is perfectly aware of the dangers in giving a straight answer. He accuses them of gross hypocrisy in setting this trap. They have no desire to know the answer. They have their own answers already. Their only intention is to lay a trap for Jesus to hang himself with.

Jesus asks them to show him a coin. He asks to know whose image and what is the inscription on it. The head was that of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor of the day. The inscription would have read, “Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus, great high priest”. Caesar claimed not only political

sovereignty but also divine attributes. Worship of the emperor was seen as a test of loyalty to the not very religious central government and would soon become a major issue for the early Christians as it was already for the Jews. For both groups, worship given to the Roman emperor could be nothing but idolatry. Even though, for some, it was seen only a matter of formality, Christians and Jews took it very seriously and many were martyred for their refusal to bow to the emperor. (Different kinds of emperors still produce martyrs in our own day.) And it reminds us of how many Christians – including China today – who refused to acknowledge the absolute power that Communism claimed over their lives. It is basically the stand of the “underground” Church in China and for that many have paid a high price over the past 50 years.

Jesus then gives his famous answer, “Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.” The answer should not be understood cynically and in line with those who thought that no allegiance at all belongs to the ruling power (e.g. the terrorist or anarchist line), nor, on the other hand, that a civil power has the right to demand total submission of its subjects. No state can claim to itself divine powers of absolute authority (e.g. atheistic dictatorships). All are subject to the higher demands of truth and justice and the inviolable dignity of the person centered in God.

We all are, in some way, the citizens of two kingdoms: citizens of the political territory where we belong and citizens in God’s Kingdom. As Jesus says, they both require certain loyalties from us.

We all depend to a large extent on our civil government. In modern times very few people can supply their own water, electricity, telephone system. There are many other services which only a civil authority can provide, such as education, hospitals, roads, welfare services for the unemployed, the handicapped, the elderly...

It is obvious that if these services are to continue and even be improved they require the cooperation and support of the community at large. We do this for the most part through paying taxes. Taxes are not just a necessary evil. In a just administration they are our contribution to making the services we take for granted available. In a just tax system, too, we help to spread more evenly the wealth of the community so that each one has access to what they need for a life of human dignity.

There are many other ways, too, in which we can give our support to raising the quality of life in the community. All of this can be seen as “giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”. One, unfortunately, does meet people whose only interest is in seeing what they can get out of the community for themselves and their immediate family with no intention of ever giving anything back.

But we are also citizens of God’s Kingdom. For much of the time, there is no conflict between “Caesar” and God but not always. We do sometimes, from the standpoint of the Gospel, have to criticise our government’s actions or non-actions. Sometimes we have to refuse to obey our government. In South Africa’s apartheid system, many Christians were forced to violate the immoral laws of their government. In the United States, both black and white people violated the segregation laws operated in many states. In the name of truth, justice and human dignity they had no option.

And we need to realise that when we really love our country and its people, then we may have to stand in strong opposition to the authorities on certain issues. Of course, the authorities will try to present such people as traitors and a threat to the stability of the country. But such people, who show they care, often have a far greater love for their country than the so-called “silent majority”.

Today's Gospel makes it very clear that we have two responsibilities: to the government of our country or territory and to God. Where both are in harmony there will be no conflict. Wherever there is immoral or unjust behaviour against people's dignity and rights, then there has to be conflict. Such conflict is not always bad. On the contrary, it is because of creative conflict that our society makes progress. Provided we always act in a positive and creative way, "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), then the flawed kingdoms that men build can, in time, become the Kingdom of God. As a famous dissident – and martyr, St Thomas More, said: "The King's good servant, but God's first."