

God or Caesar?

October 18, 2020, 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Gospel of Matthew 22:15-21

Fr. John

Today's gospel reading depicts a biblical situation that is familiar to most of us. Jesus is faced with the question 'is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?'

His questioners are not doing so in good faith. They are out to trap him so that he will either be branded as a rebel against Roman authority or seen as a traitor to his Jewish religious heritage.

It's a familiar tactic that is used by fundamentalists of every religious or political stripe to this very day. It begs the question by demanding a basic 'yes' or 'no' response and thereby putting Jesus in a position to take sides.

If we, ourselves fall into that trap, we become victims of a false dichotomy and the devil wins because he has divided and conquered.

For believers, including myself, there is no doubt that God is greater than Caesar and what Caesar represents. But we must be careful not to just leave it at that. In his response, Jesus suggests that even the emperor and the material world that he represents must be given its due.

The mistake that we often make is that we are tricked into subscribing to a dualistic view of the world and of life. We pit the spirit against the flesh, the sacred against the secular, the natural against the supernatural. Jesus response was not an 'either/ or' one but rather a 'both/and' one.

In our first reading from Isaiah, we hear how God uses a pagan emperor like Cyrus to free the Israelites to return to their homeland and thus continue unfolding His ultimate divine plan.

In today's world, we have some scientists, political and social activists who are not Christian or subscribe to any religious belief but who are actively engaged in humanitarian initiatives - sometimes even putting us believers to shame.

So, as much as I love the Church and my Catholic, Christian faith tradition, I have to realize that God is much bigger than what I conceptualize Him to be. If God is the Creator of the entire universe, than nothing He has created can be foreign to Him.

Our belief in the Incarnation and the bodily Resurrection of Christ is a belief that all things in the material universe bear the imprint of the Creator and are therefore holy.

The only thing that could be otherwise is the rebelliousness that affects the human heart - a rebelliousness that we call - sin!

It is from this rebelliousness that false dichotomies and dualisms arise and deep seated polarizations result.

God's Spirit encompasses all of creation and the oneness that underlies it all. That is why, in John's Gospel, Jesus prays to his Father for unity not only among his disciples but throughout the world. [...that they be one as we are one. [With me in them and you in me, may they be so perfected in unity that the world will recognize that it was you who sent me and that you have loved them as you loved me'] Jn17:22-23 So Jesus' response in today's gospel is not a rejection of one part of life against another. Rather it was consistent with the whole purpose of the Incarnation to see the sacred within the secular, the spiritual within the flesh of our human existence, the supernatural within the natural.

This is not to deny the flaws that still exist in the world as a result of our human freedom not to choose the ways that lead to unity and the fullness of life.

But God's plan for us is still a work in progress. It's unfolding to that point wherein all humankind will eventually be enfolded as one in the arms of God, Who is Love.