

God and Caesar

Matthew 22:15 Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. **16** And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. **17** Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? **18** But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? **19** Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. **20** And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? **21** They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. **22** When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.

Veteran's Day will soon be celebrated, and with it come a host of thoughts about duty to one's country. Today's Gospel is a very appropriate text regarding this topic. It's my hope that as we examine Jesus' words, we will find direction for ourselves as American believers living in these times.

We should review the context of this interaction between the Jewish leaders and the Lord. The scene occurs during Jesus' final week in Jerusalem prior to His crucifixion, when the hatred and opposition of His enemies reached its peak. They had been trying for a long time to find a pretext for His destruction, but were frustrated at every turn. This latest attempt was an effort to get Him arrested and tried by the Roman authorities for making an overt antigovernment statement.

They were convinced that they had Him. If He refused to pay tribute, He would be arrested. But if He insisted on paying it, He would be seen by the Jewish nation as a traitor to their cause of independence from Roman tyranny, making Him as much an agent of their oppressors as the despised tax collectors, and arousing the contempt of the masses against Him.

They approach Him with flattery, pretending to affirm His place as a respected rabbi, and also as one who doesn't kowtow to human authority, although their intent is to undermine Him on both accounts.

Jesus, knowing their intent, offers them neither praise nor encouragement for their question, but condemns them as hypocrites. But it is His answer to them that is of particular significance to us. Calling for the tribute money, he obligates them to utter with their own mouths the title of the hated Roman ruler: *And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.*

Jesus has provided them in a few short words far too much for them to think about on the spot, and because they were unable to dispute His answer, and elicit from it their hoped for purpose of getting Him condemned, they departed. But why is His response confounding? Incredi-

bly, He is establishing that there is a place for Caesar that must be honored and rendered its just due. And there is a place for God. No one purporting to do just service to God can do so without doing just service to Caesar, as well, —and one might add here pointedly— *as long as Caesar exists*, which will certainly be, in one form or another, as long as the world endures.

But what about Caesar? And what about Rome? In order to get things in perspective here, we need to remind ourselves that God uses the secular powers of this world to His own ends, but is subject to none of them. *Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing* declares the prophet Isaiah (40:15). *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth* warns the psalmist (2:9, 10). God used Assyria and Babylon, the mightiest empires upon earth of their day, to bring judgment against His own people, but when He had accomplished His purposes through them, He humbled them. God spoke to Isaiah, saying:

...thou shalt take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! the golden city ceased! The LORD hath broken the staff of the wicked, and the sceptre of the rulers. He who smote the people in wrath with a continual stroke, he that ruled the nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth (Is. 14:4-6).

The Lord had previously warned Israel through Moses and the prophets that He would use the Gentile nations to punish His people if they were persistently disobedient. Following the rule of Israel's great kings, rare were the times when the Jews were not made subservient to mighty invaders, culminating finally in their subjugation to Rome.

But it is very important to search diligently for the hand of God in all of this. Certainly divine discipline is one reason for Israel's bondage. But there were also benefits that resulted from those who ruled them: Protection from enemies who might have utterly destroyed God's chosen people. In Rome's case, the incredible interconnection of the empire which allowed extensive and easier travel to many lands and civilizations. Access to a codified legal system which made it less likely that the whims of parties, factions, and individuals would create chaos and disruption. All of this vastly facilitated the spreading of the Gospel, as we see in the Book of Acts. Perhaps it is because Rome was set firmly in place, among other factors, that the Scripture declares: *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman...* (Gal. 4:4), precisely the time when things were ideal for the advent of our Lord.

Back to today's Gospel: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's*. Jewish pride had been humbled by God's chastising hand. To rebel against it was absolutely futile, a lesson the Jews would learn bitterly within a few short decades after these words were spoken, when Roman legions smashed an armed Jewish uprising in Jerusalem and completely demolished the cherished Second Temple. It would have been better

to have submitted to Caesar, but even vastly more important, to God. Had they *rendered unto God* what belonged to Him, they would have obeyed Him, conforming to His plan in its entirety, which above all things consisted of accepting His Son, The King of Israel, Jesus Christ.

All of the above provides us with a context of viewing our own situation today. Veteran's Day is really a holdover from a time not even that long ago when this country was filled with a reasonable sense of pride and self-respect, built not upon a string of conquests and victories, but upon a shared sense of virtue. We believed in what we were, a country which honored God, practiced good living, and looked up to all things noble and decent. Even though it could never be claimed that everyone everywhere followed these ideals conscientiously, they were so pervasive that they thoroughly informed the collective spirit of the country.

And so people enlisted in the military to defend the nation against foes who if not checked would without question have sought to destroy what all the priceless treasures American knew were to be protected at all costs: liberty, freedom, democracy, and human rights. It was easier then to *render unto Caesar what are Caesar's*, because Americans generally considered their own interests to be furthered by a government which shared them.

Things have changed, and the culpability for that is a shared one. All of us realize that we have become appendages of a government that grows ever larger, not only demanding from us much of our substance, but turning against us in ideals and philosophy, slowly but surely ceasing to be our friend but becoming our foe. We blame those with set agendas who have seized the high places of leadership and influence, but we ourselves have placed our order for these circumstances at the drive-up window of convenience and pleasure. We have found it too hard to love God, to control ourselves, to discipline our children, to study history and learn from its lessons, to exercise our minds and make sound decisions, and so we have invited the government, and a host of associated experts, to do the job for us.

Surely this also amounts to a form of divine discipline, as well. God withdraws His blessing from a land which doesn't value it, and into the vacuum rushes everything hungry to occupy the place of influence left by His departure. Having failed *to render unto God the things that are God's* we find ourselves in the place of Jesus' adversaries, subject to the rule of Caesar, and not even understanding why.

You will notice I've used the collective "we", and by this I mean "we Americans" in general. But let's face it: earnest Christian believers, as much as they take exception with all of the above, cannot help but be caught up in the same great wave of consequences that affect all Americans. Even the Holy Family, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, were subject to the regulations of the Roman overlords, as were all the righteous remnant throughout Israel's history whose lives certainly did not invite the wrath of God. We have no choice but to fulfill Jesus' words in our times, not

failing to fulfill our obligations both to the State, and to God. Those words are few and simple, but there is an enormous amount implied in them.

We cannot hope to properly discern exactly how much we owe Caesar today, unless we are scrupulous in fulfilling our duty to God. But what is that duty? Living holy, separate lives. Allowing the Spirit to so thoroughly rule our tongues and words that we are perceived as gracious, kind, humble, forgiving, even when we are confronted with the sort of wickedness and lawlessness with which our land is being filled, and find ourselves heaped with scorn and ridicule. Keeping our eyes upon those things that man can never ruin or destroy —the riches of God's eternal Kingdom— even when we are forced to stand by while the things we cherish about our land are being trashed and maligned.

This is no small deal, *rendering to God* what is His. But if we set ourselves to that task, our duties to Caesar will become clearer. As long as he yet affords us some degree of protection, we owe him support. As long as he facilitates the spread of the Gospel through the infrastructure he provides, we cannot withhold what he is due.

A time will surely come when he will no longer tolerate us, in spite of our Christian deportment. It has happened before. But that will be Caesar's decision, not ours. It will be entirely his responsibility alone. Until then, for conscience sake, let's go along with Jesus' admonition.

We have a big assignment. Let's do it together.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.