

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 29th SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 45: 4-6 Psalm 96 1Thessalonians 1: 1-5b Matthew 22: 15-21

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Even people who are not biblically illiterate know the quote featured in today's Gospel reading. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (The older translation had "render"--today's has "repay.") Which goes to show how effectively Matthew has laid out the account. He wants this quote stressed; this is a Pronouncement story; the key to the episode is in the punch line. The preceding details leading to the concluding line are meant as a set-up for it.

Today's passage is the first of four confrontations Jesus has with the religious authorities. They ask a question, he gives an answer. The questions they pose are loaded with controversy and are meant to trap him. The controversy in today's confrontation is fairly obvious. Paying taxes to a nation whose occupying army was oppressing your people was particularly noxious to most Jews. The Pharisees were most bitterly opposed to this tax. Their companions in the exchange with Jesus were the Herodians, who favored paying the tax to accommodate the Romans. Strange bedfellows, these opponents of Jesus. (See John Pilch's quote below.) However Jesus responds, he is going to offend someone; not just the religious parties posing the question, but the general Jewish population who would surely learn of Jesus' answer. If Jesus came out against paying the tax, surely he would be reported to the Romans, who were always on guard for voices of sedition.

Jesus calls his questioners hypocrites. Why? When he asks for the coin, they are quick to produce one. They are carrying the Roman coins themselves, "They handed him the Roman coin." The coins were stamped with both an image of Caesar and transcriptions which claimed his having political rule and divine status. A human with divine status! A graven image! A ruler over God's People! What an affront to any Jew. Those carrying the coin were using it to pay the tax. Jesus tells them "repay to Caesar," he might be suggesting that a faithful person could still recognize secular rule. But he gives no absolute guidelines, thus leaving much to the interpretation of his followers throughout the ages. That interpretation has varied, even among people in the very same Christian and

secular context.

We get a pretty clear idea of what government asks of us; we are to be responsible and informed citizens; vote in elections; pay taxes; obey national and local laws; defend the country when outside forces threaten it, etc. In the light of the Gospel today, and with the upcoming national and local elections, the preacher has a valuable opportunity to remind the congregation about practicing the virtue of responsible citizenship. Our American bishops have said that participation in the political process is an obligation. The bishops caution however, that they do not seek to form a voting block nor to instruct us how to vote. The preacher should follow this example. But the preacher can promote citizenship and encourage people to help shape a national life that has more respect for life and the dignity of each person. Political policies are to be evaluated by how they affect the poor, the vulnerable, the unborn. We will need to use the values of our faith to inform our voting. However, the bishops have advised us that reference to particular candidates should not be made.

It's the second part of Jesus' statement that frustrates any attempts some might attempt to keep politics and religion in separate tidy boxes. Jesus untidies our neat distinctions. Give "to God what belongs to God," he tells us. Here I am asked to examine my personal and public life, to see if and how I am "giving to God." It's not financial remunerations we are talking about here. Giving to God requires my full dedication to God; it will include my private and my public self.

Some very holy people have found their giving to God required them to not give to Caesar. M.L. King, Jr. is a good example; so is Dorothy Day, who challenged both national and church policies. During the Spanish conquest of the Americas, the Dominican Bartolomeo de las Casas argued against his government's enslavement of indigenous peoples; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a minister, even joined a plot against Hitler.

We can't cordon off our lives; the "secular" from the "religious." God's presence and actions are not confined to our narrow categories. That's what Isaiah stresses. Our notion of God is too small. What does belong to God? All our heart, all our soul and all our mind. God deserves total allegiance from us because, as Paul reminds us, we have been freely chosen by God to live lives of "faith and love." The gift of faith has been given; we are expected now to live out that gift by lives of full dedication to God and God's service.

The preacher might reflect on the commitments we have made in God's presence, that is, the vows and promises we have taken. Baptism is no part time job to which we dedicate ourselves when we are not occupied with other concerns. We can't decide that only part of our lives will be Christian and in another part, follow some other god—like our ambition. We have taken marriage vows, committing our lives to another neither is this a part time commitment that allows us "time off" to dally elsewhere. Some of us are called to serve in public office or in a job of service like the military, police, fire department, medical profession, etc. We may even have taken an oath to be faithful to the people we serve. There is no time off from these oaths that then gives us permission to extort, receive favors, or short change people in any way. Nor is there any backing away from our vocations of work which require that we fulfill our duties faithfully and with integrity all the time.

As a national election approached several years ago, John Kavanaugh reflected on this Gospel in AMERICA magazine:

"Out of both sides of the empire's mouth come sophistries. One jabbars about "morality," the other about "the right thing." But behind the glib words is a message: How good we have it, how much better off we will be if we vote for the privileged candidate. There will be found in this political campaign precious few words that appeal to our generosity, our discipline or our spirit of sacrifice. If there is talk of discipline and sacrifice, these will be prescribed for the poor. If there is language of compassion, it will ring of self-righteous narcissism."

I think the question Jesus poses, "whose image is this?" presents an opening for the preacher. While the coin has the image of Caesar, all humans have been made in the image of God. We participate in political life in one way or another; but all along we do so as an icon of God. We belong to God and all we do and say must bear that imprint. When political power violates that image in us, other individuals or whole groups of people, then we are required to speak up, to act in ways that preserve the image of God in those who are victimized. And in doing this we remember that even those who are the oppressors are also made in the image of God

There are not neat lines of demarcation between Caesar's and God's realms. Our

primary loyalty is with God, “what belongs to God” is to be protected and promoted. As Charles Cousar says, “When the divine image is denied and persons are made by political circumstances to be less than human, then the text carries a revolutionary word that has to be spoken to both oppressed and oppressor.” (In TEXTS FOR PREACHING: A LECTIONARY COMMENTARY BASED ON THE NRSV--YEAR A. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, page 533.)

In today’s Eucharist we receive the totally faithful One. Jesus is one who gave himself completely to God, and did not waver or compromise on his commitment. This food will enable us to live faithful lives, helping us to renew and stay faithful to the commitments we have made. What “belongs to God?” Everything. The Eucharist will make that total offering possible.

QUOTABLE

In the time of Jesus, the denarius bore the image of the emperor Tiberius, who ruled between 14 and 37 C.E., and an inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Pharisees were particularly disturbed by the attribution of divinity to Caesar but also considered possession of this graven image to be idolatrous. They devised ways to pay this tax without possessing or handling the coin. But if a Herodian in the group produced the coin, the Pharisees would still be shamed by having selected unworthy allies. In either case, the fact that someone in their group possessed and produced the coin was shameful. Jesus' first riposte to their challenge cuts deep.

His second riposte lies in his questions: “Whose head? Whose title?” The inscription and image were plainly visible and clearly legible. The Pharisees' reply sets up Jesus' positive answer: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.” Later (see Luke 23: 2) the Pharisees will lie and say that Jesus answered negatively....

Jesus' concluding exhortation, "Give to God the things that belong to God," implies that neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians are doing that. This is a serious charge.... Americans tend to see in this passage an argument for the separation of church and state. Such an idea makes no sense in first-century Mediterranean culture. Religion and economics both are embedded in politics and kinship. There was state religion (Temple; empire) and family and religion (home); state economics (taxes and redistribution) and family economics (gifts

and sharing). Our modern Western situation and its challenges are different. For us as for our ancestors what matters most is to please God."

-----John Pilch, THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995, page 152.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

William Barnes

Roger Blakeney

Shawn Bonnett

Address: Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican

sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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