

Trinity XXIII – 12 November 2023

“Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.

When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.”

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son...

“All hail, Caesar!” As a person who studied Latin for several years and then taught it for even more, these words do not sound particularly odd to me. To the average American, to whom Latin is nothing more than a dead language spoken by an empire they have not studied since they were forced to do so in school somewhere along the way, they might seem even nonsensical. To the first century Jews, we might call them fighting words! Yes, they were under the Roman authorities, but it was certainly not of their choosing! Those occupying Romans of course, were perfectly happy with the situation:

why wouldn't everyone want to be part of the greatest empire the world had ever known up to that point?

Into this situation walks Jesus Christ. The Pharisees knew there was no right answer. By that, I mean there was no answer that Jesus could give that would not get him in trouble with somebody.

Remember, the Jews wanted a revolutionary Messiah who was going to kick out the Romans and restore the free state of Israel. If He had told the Pharisees, "I really think you should pay your taxes. Yes, I know the Romans don't follow our God, but they make great roads and aqueducts, so why can't we all just get along?" He would have lost any credibility with the Jews that He had. They bitterly resented being occupied by the Romans, and paying taxes was just one more reminder of that fact. But if Our Lord, hoping to gain followers amongst the Jews, had told the Pharisees that they should not pay their taxes, the Jewish authorities could have easily relieved

themselves of Him by turning Him over to Pilate as a dangerous revolutionary. (Of course, this is what they ended up doing, but not yet.)

But Our Lord is not easily trapped. Just last week in our lectionary, if you recall, Peter tried to trap Jesus in the whole “How many times must I forgive my brother?” scenario? Jesus is always one step ahead of His challengers! Paying the tribute was no violation of the Law of God nor did it preclude a Jew from following God’s commandments of service and love to God and neighbor, so Jesus gave us the now-famous, “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”

There is more to the story though: the gentile Christians of the early Church had a very different quarrel with the Roman government. As non- Jews they were uninterested in the occupation or eventual freedom of a Jewish state. They were not opposed to the political

claims of the Roman Empire, but to the religious ones. One had to pay taxes or a tribute, that is what one does when one lives in a country with a government. The issue for those gentiles was with the “image” of Caesar that appeared on the front of the coin. From the establishment of the Roman Empire, the image was associated with the divine honors paid to the Roman Emperor. Arguably, this is a more serious concern. The Jews did not wish to support financially an occupying force, but they were not required to do anything that violated their religious convictions. When persecutions of the Church took place however, Christians were required to choose between worshipping God or worshipping the emperor. The gentile Christians knew it was impossible to serve two gods.

As contemporary Christians, we have two temptations: one is to combine politics and religion so much that we cannot fathom them not being inter-connected. Because the government has such-and-

such particular stand, I should not have to pay taxes to an immoral entity. I read from time to time about some group or well-known individual that is going to attempt to refuse to pay taxes until the American government changes its policy on one thing or another. If we try hard enough (or maybe we do not have to try very hard) we can all find something our government spends money on that we would rather they not. If every taxpayer has the right to simply withhold his taxes whenever he finds something distasteful that government funds go to, no one would ever be paying taxes! While we may argue that taxes are too high or that some government spending is wasteful, I doubt most of us want such draconian cuts to spending as my hypothetical would require.

The other temptation is just to assume that government can do whatever it wants and we as Christians do not have to worry about it. As if as Christians we can somehow choose to divorce ourselves from

the government and then there is nothing they can do about us. This is tempting for some who are ready to “give up” on our American society because things have changed so much in recent years. You may have heard of the “Benedict Option”, which is a phrase coined by Rod Dreher a liberal Episcopalian turned traddy Roman Catholic turned environmental Eastern Orthodox (don’t ask me to explain the steps there – I do not quite understand them myself), and named for the famous monk St. Benedict of Nursia. Dreher did not actually invent the term, but borrowed it from Alasdair Macintyre. Perhaps that is why he has found it difficult to clearly define. He will tell you it is an “inchoate phenomenon in which Christians adopt a more consciously countercultural stance towards our post-Christian mainstream culture.” That is great, but do not ask him how that looks when it is applied because you will not get an answer. How it has been interpreted however, by Christians who think it is a good idea is to set

up little communes throughout the country where Christians can live according to the dictates of their consciences (and presumably Holy Writ), pull up the drawbridge, stick their heads in the sand, and ignore what the rest of the culture is doing, without either trying to live in it or change it for the better.

Brethren, I fail to see where this thinking will produce fruitful results over time. It may sound good to have a “holiday” of sorts from the craziness of post-modern culture, but Christ did not tell us to go on a permanent holiday!

Political policies are not immune from the higher judgments of religious faith and ethics. But for us as Christians, it really is not about politics. Our loyalty is to God, and on that we should not compromise. We must be witnesses for Him. There is no escape by building “Christian-berg” or whatever one wants to call it. The only option is to witness and evangelize. {Gasp!} I know those are not words that we

Anglicans like to hear, much less put into practice, but it is our only option. It worked for the Early Church, it can work for us.

Indeed, render unto Caesar what he requires of us, but we must render unto God what God requires of us first. And God consistently calls us to change the world – not to give up, and not to hide from the world. Perhaps American Christianity has been too comfortable too long. It is time to get back to basics. If 12 uneducated fishermen could begin an evangelization of the known world, then we must take our cue from them and work to make those who render all to Caesar want to render all to God.

+In the Name...