

Sunday between 30<sup>th</sup> October and 5<sup>th</sup> November [31]

Mark 12:13-17, 28-34

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is one of those texts from Scripture that raises questions without any satisfactory answers. The more we study this text, the more we are left to struggle with our own conscience and to supply our own answers. First, let us consider the strange circumstances in which this story unfolds. We are told that the Pharisees plotted to entrap Jesus. That is not so strange there are many references in the bible to an ongoing battle between the religious leaders of Israel and Jesus, concerning Jesus' authority versus that of appointed leaders of the Temple. Apparently, the Pharisees were concerned about the masses that were following Jesus, and so they wanted to discredit him before the people.

But what is strange about this text, is the fact that the Pharisees, those deeply pious and religious purists, have teamed up with the Herodians. The Herodians were a group of Jews who had compromised their faith and piety, in order to win favours from the governing forces. Clearly, the Pharisees and the Herodians made strange partners in their attempt to discredit Jesus. They actually despised each other.

Then, after some sweet talking flattery, we come to the question. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus answered "No," the Herodians, those who enjoyed the benefits of Roman rule, would report him to the authorities as a traitor or seditionist. If Jesus answered "Yes," the Pharisees would have ample fuel to discredit him among the people as a Roman sympathizer, a person unfaithful to the faith of Israel. Perhaps, this is what prompted Jesus, as these two conflicting groups approached him, to refer to them as hypocrites. Jesus knew that there had to be some devious intent behind their teaming up to confront him. But Jesus didn't succumb to their ploy, their desire to entrap him.

Instead, Jesus asked to see the coin used to pay the taxes. It was a coin that bore the image of the Roman emperor, and so Jesus asked, "Whose image is on the coin?" Both groups answered, "The emperor." Jesus then replied, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." And Mark tells us that when they heard this, they were amazed.

Now that is a really amazing answer. It enabled Jesus to escape the trap that these two extreme but opposing groups were trying to set for him. It acknowledged to the Herodians that we do have obligations to uphold to our worldly governments, and it expressed to the Pharisees that we have obligations to uphold as citizens of God's kingdom. But is it really an answer? It was certainly a response that did more than merely foil their trick. Jesus gave a teaching that left them with a challenge that rings down through the centuries. In fact, Jesus' response presents us with a far more difficult question.

If we think about Jesus' answer, we must conclude that we, as Christians living on this earth, are citizens of two kingdoms. The first part of his answer acknowledges the fact that we have a responsibility to uphold as citizens of the world, and to the governing authorities of our Nation, our State, our County and our community. Jesus acknowledges that we have an obligation to pay taxes to the government, for the various services and benefits that result from living under its ruling authority – we

must acknowledge that his response goes further than simply paying taxes. Jesus said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." Governments have the right to establish laws and have the authority to enforce them. Living in society demands a lot from us.

Jesus' response upholds the authority of earthly government. So does the apostle Paul, who asserts repeatedly in his writings to the early Christian churches, that believers are to respect governmental authority. If Jesus' response would have ended with "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," we would have been left with a mandate to live our lives adhering to the authority of our earthly rulers. But Jesus didn't end there! He also added, "give to God the things that are God's."

There is the dilemma. God also deserves our allegiance, as citizens of God's kingdom. Clearly God deserves our offerings, our worship and thanksgiving for the gift of redeeming grace as members of the church here on earth. But what else belongs to God?

The Roman coin that Jesus held bore the image of the emperor; therefore it belonged to the emperor. But what bears the image and name of God? Nothing but our whole being! In the very first chapter of Genesis, we are told that God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." And the author of this first book of the Bible concluded, "So God created us in God's image..."

We are the coins of God's realm, of his kingdom. If we are to "give to God the things that are God's," then we must conclude from our Lord's teaching that there is no limit to what we owe God. We owe God our whole being, our very life, all that is ours. No part of our life is excluded from our fundamental commitment to our Creator, and to Jesus who has redeemed us from sin and death to make us citizens of his kingdom.

Thus, Jesus' response to the question meant to entrap him, traps us all! We live as citizens of two kingdoms – an earthly kingdom, to which we owe certain allegiances, and a heavenly kingdom to which we owe everything. Jesus' response doesn't really settle the dispute between the Herodians and the Pharisees, any more than it settles the conflict that each of us face as we try to live out our faith today. Rather, Jesus invites us into the struggle. He invites us to acknowledge that our government has a right to expect a certain allegiance from us, but the allegiance we owe our earthly kingdoms is limited. What we owe to God is not.

Our readings today should remind us that any commitment we make to Christ through baptism does not mean coming out of the wider world into God's kingdom only – but rather it means walking the line of being in the world but not of the world, and it is a constant work that we all must do to continue to find ways of meeting our sometimes paradoxical commitments of Church and world effectively. Giving to the world that which belongs to the world and to God our whole lives.