



SUNDAY GOSPEL

On tribute to Caesar

MATTHEW 22:15-21

The Pharisees went away to work out between them how to trap Jesus in what he said. And they sent their disciples to him, together with the Herodians, to say, 'Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, 'You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for me? Let me see the money



Tribute money by Bernardo Strozzi

you pay the tax with.' They handed him a denarius, and he replied, 'Whose head is this? Whose name?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. He then said to them,

'Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what belongs to God.' ■

GOSPEL REFLECTION

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Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his taking possession of the Temple has led to a series of parables through which he attacks the political

and religious leaders of Israel. He has always held the initiative. Now that changes. Having been on the receiving end of Jesus' thinly veiled attacks through the parables, the Pharisees attempt to put Jesus into a no-win situation. The telling of the story, however, already places the Pharisees in a bad light. They go away from the conflict 'to work out between them

how to trap him'. They do not have the courage to face Jesus themselves. They 'send their disciples to him, together with the Herodians'. This itself is an unholy alliance between the defenders of the tradition (the Pharisees and their disciples) and the royal party who worked in league with the Romans (the Herodians).

The messengers praise his teaching 'the way of God in an honest way'. Jesus does indeed speak the truth. In fact, this is what will lead him to the Cross. The trap they are setting is an attempt to lead him to that Cross. They ask whether one should pay taxes to Caesar. This question could place Jesus in a no-win situation. If Jesus answers 'yes', then he will be guilty of disloyalty to the Jewish people, represented by the messengers of the Pharisees; if he says 'no', then he

will be guilty of fomenting rebellion against Rome, represented by the Herodians.

Jesus sees through their malice and hypocrisy, and tells them so. He asks for the denarius, the coin used to pay the tax. He does not carry it, but his opponents are quite willing to use Caesar's money in their business transactions. It is a tacit acceptance of Caesar's system. As they are willing to carry the coin which carries Caesar's effigy, they should also be willing to give back to Caesar what is his. But there is a further duty beyond rendering to Caesar what is his. They are obliged to recognise the supreme Sovereign.

As our gospel readings over the past weeks have shown, since Jesus

arrived in Jerusalem there have been continual conflicts between himself and the Jewish authorities. Thus, it is their second obligation – rendering to God – which needs their attention. They should be worrying less about what is due to Caesar, and paying more attention to the presence of the Son of God in their midst.

Politics and religion mix rather uncomfortably, yet politics and religion there will always be. It is not a question of naively forgetting one or the other. It is a question of putting first things first. Politics which look to the service of the supreme Sovereign will work, but a service of God which is dominated by politics can only bring hatred and sinfulness into the Church. These principles, so clearly enunciated

in today's encounter between Jesus and representatives of both religious authority (Pharisees) and political authority (Herodians), not only challenge the Church to preach and live the gospel of Jesus Christ, rather than the gospel of political convenience. ■

TALKING POINTS

1. 'They do not have the courage to face Jesus themselves'; An unholy alliance has formed, as Fr Francis establishes. Are there any unholy alliances in your own life? Who or what may you have 'made friends with' in order to support or justify disordered actions? These things may be pride, self-sufficiency, independence, playing the victim (I deserve this because I'm a bad person.)
2. Jesus wants to free us from these things by recognising the sovereignty of God. How might you pay more attention to the Son of God in your midst? What are the marks or indicators of his presence?

PRAYER POINTS

Pray for Each Other: Ask about and pray for the needs of the group members. Individuals might pray for themselves or ask someone else to pray for them.

Response: *Jesus, reign in our hearts.*

Reflect: We are challenged as church to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than a gospel of political convenience. In the current climate, this is of particular significance. Spend some time asking Jesus to equip you to fulfil this mandate in your own particular way.

Closing Prayer: Jesus, you are Lord of all. We recognise your kingship and humbly place ourselves in your service. May we give to you all that is due.