

Connecting With the Sunday Readings

Twenty-ninth Sunday Gospel Word
Ordinary Time Matthew 22:15-21

Today's Gospel reading scene appears to be entrapment. Jesus was not popular with some Pharisees, as well as other religious leaders who believed he was too critical of their ways. Perhaps they spent many evenings crafting the taxation question that they hoped would destroy his reputation, either as a prophet, or as a good Jew. We do not know for sure. We do know that they had the question posed by their disciples, not themselves, of course! Along with the Pharisees' disciples was a group of people who were close to Herod. The hope was that Jesus would incriminate himself by failing to give due allegiance to the Roman emperor over the question of taxation, and Herod would hear about it. At the end of the account, it's worth considering the brilliance of Jesus' response: "...Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (21)

There are a variety of quite scholarly opinions of what Jesus meant by that. Some may say that since everything really belongs to God, then there's no need to pay taxes to Caesar. On the other hand, Jesus doesn't directly forbid paying taxes to Caesar. Some suggest that Jesus is laying a foundation for the separation of church and state. This is probably not the case, but we can say, however, that Jesus escaped the trap set by his enemies, and left us with something to think about.

-by David Thomas, PhD, Co-Director, The Bethany Family Institute

Living the Word

Sometimes the words of Jesus give the same feeling that can arise when looking into the night sky, especially on a crystal clear night in the middle of winter. The longer you look, the deeper the darkness. It's like looking into what seems a bottomless hole. Some questions are not easily understood with black and white clarity. The world has some grey areas to consider. We need to think about so many things, discuss them, research them, pray about them, and then make the best decisions we can in light of our beliefs and values. Hard choices have to be made. There are no easy answers. We just have to do our best and hope for the rest.

Jesus did not leave us with a guidebook with specific answers to all of our questions. But God did give us a mind to use in making decisions. Sometimes we have to pray, ask advice, consider the options, and trust in God that we've made good choices. We must continue to trust ourselves, and the God who stays with us no matter what. Jesus really didn't give a clear answer to the Pharisees. He laid down a general principle, and left it open for them to figure out the rest. In that sense, he respected them. Certainly he offers us the same respect as we try to make good decisions for our own lives.

Prayer

God of Wisdom,
Help us make good
and wise decisions.
Amen.