

29th Sunday – Year A

If you were to see Rush Limbaugh and Rachel Maddow whispering together and looking your way, and then walking together toward you, you would probably be justified in thinking “I wonder what they are up to?”

Coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum we wouldn’t expect them to enter into a common endeavor about anything.

When Jesus was approached by the Pharisees and Herodians, he might have thought the same thing. The two groups were normally at odds with one another, one pandering to the Romans and the other trying to find a way to get out from under them. What could possibly bring them together?

Turns out, they both see Jesus as a threat, and even though they put it nicely, they label the threat as Jesus’ practice of speaking the truth to all, regardless of their position in society. He was making life uncomfortable for both groups. The truth can do that.

So, the trap, the most controversial issue of the day: how to respond to Roman power and oppression. Should Jews pay the census tax or not?

Both groups assume that Jesus will have to side with one group or the other and, in doing so, will be compromised somewhere and lose stature.

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Jesus' response is sheer genius, and underlines the fact that Jesus is not interested in power plays among the various groups vying for it.

He truly is a prophet of God and brings God's perspective to bear on the activities of his contemporaries, letting the chips fall where they may.

When Jesus asks to see a coin, the first thing we notice is that his questioners have one. At least to some extent they are collaborating with the Roman system. Strict Jews would not be caught dead with Roman money because it had the inscription proclaiming Caesar Augustus to be divine. It could be considered a form of idolatry.

Jesus did not carry Roman coins, or any other coins for that matter.

But Jesus does not go into the issue of idolatry. Instead he responds with "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Good answer. The Herodians would be inclined to read into the answer, "See, paying taxes to Caesar is okay" only to be caught by the second part of the response, "repay to God what is God's." Their collaboration with the Romans had led them to stray away from the law of God.

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The Pharisees would be inclined to hear in the first part a reason to discount Jesus' role as a teacher of Israel, only to be caught in the second part where he clearly acknowledges that we all are completely indebted to God.

The question that remains for all concerned is "How to put those two things together?" To that question Jesus does not provide an answer, only a stimulus for personal reflection.

What belongs to Caesar? or in our times we might have to reformulate the question to read, "What is my debt to society and to the common good?"

And what belongs to God? Probably an easier question would be "ultimately, what doesn't belong to God?"

Jesus' response still confronts us today as we work out, not once and for all, but in an ongoing manner, how to acknowledge the legitimate rights a society has to call forth from its members their civic duty.

But to recognize at the same time that every human society, every human government has limits to what it can expect of its citizens. Asking for blind obedience would seem to be too much. A society cannot overrule an individual person's

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conscience.

Our consciences, though, are also gifts given to us by God, and so must be oriented to how he intends for them to be formed and used.

The Christian way is to follow our conscience in all the concrete circumstances in which the demands of society and the demands of our faith interact, and to engage in the never-ending process of forming our consciences according to the truth of the Gospel and our Catholic Christian tradition.

Jesus' response required further reflection on the part of both the Herodians and the Pharisees. It was a call to a change of heart, to becoming less hypocritical.

His response requires nothing less of us 2000 years later. How will we negotiate the various demands of God and Caesar?

Are we willing to give God his due even though he doesn't demand it like the Romans did and the IRS might? That's a key question none of us can escape as we walk the journey of faith.