

**Homily to St. Louise de Marillac Church, Bellevue, WA
Deacon Bill Haines & Gina Haines**

**29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
October 19, 2008**

**Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b
Matt 22:15-21**

.....Bill.....

Taxes and how they are used have always been a sensitive issue. The Pharisees and the Herodians are acutely aware of this when they approach Jesus with the question: "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"

By and large the Pharisees were anti-Roman while the Herodians, supporters of the dynasty of Herod, were pro-Roman. They figure they have Jesus either way. Either answer, yes or no, will get him in trouble. If Jesus answers yes, he will lose the esteem of the people and be discredited as a traitor to the Jewish cause for independence from Rome. If Jesus answers no, he could be denounced as provoking a rebellion. Rome regarded refusal to pay taxes as tantamount to rebellion. Jesus, however, refuses to give a yes or no answer. Instead he asks for a denarius and asks whose image it carries. Hearing that it is Caesar's Jesus replies, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." Jesus affirms that we have both civic and religious obligations.

Most of us when we read or hear Jesus response think something like this: That is a clever answer, but now Jesus has left us with another difficult question: How do we sort out what is Caesar's and what is God's?

That reaction only hits part of the point of Jesus' remark. Lacking the cultural context of the gospel, we miss two things. First, when Jesus asks for the coin (which is promptly produced), he exposes the hypocrisy of his questioners. Any Jew, who was sensitive to the demands of the Mosaic Law, would not be carrying a coin embossed with the image of an emperor pictured as divine. The bearer of such a "graven image" has already settled for themselves the question of relating to the Roman Empire and its economy.

Second, Jesus' question about whose "image" the coin carries contains an allusion that most of us miss. If an image on something indicates authority and ownership, and Caesar' image on the coin implies the dominion of the empire, what bears God's image, indicating the ownership and dominion of God? Anyone, especially any Jew, knew that human beings are created in the image of God.

.....Gina.....

Jesus' response is not a clever dodge. It is a confrontation. The world is not divided into one part for God, however large, and one part for Caesar, however small. All creation is, first of all, under God's sovereignty, especially human beings who as

God's image have a special role in stewarding the goods of creation. Then within that context, one works out the smaller question of relating to the empire. Jesus' challenge to his adversaries then, is that in refusing to deal with Jesus' truth, they are resisting the reign of God. They are failing to live out their roles as bearers of God's image.

This story offers no neat solution to the question of Church-state relations. The legitimate state has rights and the good citizen will respect them. For Christians, there may come a time when we must hearken to the supreme Sovereign, rather than to the state. An example of this would be Martin Luther King's march on Washington DC to fight for civil rights for all Americans. Dr. King chose to follow God's will rather than the law of the land. Jesus has given us a principle, but like so much of his teaching, it has to be lived out in situations that are not always clear to us. Dr. King gave his life to carry out this principle.

The reading from Isaiah provides a powerful background for mediation on the gospel. Isaiah presents the voice of God referring to another head of empire, Cyrus the Great, as his "anointed one." The Hebrew word for "anointed one" is *moshiach* from which the English word "messiah" comes. Except for Cyrus, there is no other gentile ruler in the Old Testament who is called "the Lord's anointed". This pagan emperor of the Persians earns that title because, he, albeit unknowingly, has become God's instrument in the restoration of the exiled Judeans to their home land. As in the actions and words of Jesus in today's Gospel, God's role as Creator of all is very much in the picture. Before and after, the prophet speaks of God as "the Lord, who made all things, / who alone stretched out the heavens, / spread out the earth" and who "created mankind upon it". Unlike Cyrus, the Pharisees and the Herodians were failing to cooperate with the Creator of all.

.....Bill.....

Even in our own day when we address the question of taxation, we can suffer from amnesia regarding the image of God borne by all humanity. We live in a culture that easily divides the world into three parts, one part, as much as I can get for me and mine, the second part, as little as possible for the state, and, oh yes, a third part, the leftovers for God.

Jesus would remind us that as creatures made in God's image, we are to use taxes as a tool for seeing that the goods of the earth are used to meet the needs of all. When our government fails to do that, we have a moral obligation under God's law to take action. Today, this may not be a popular notion when the highest political goal appears to be providing tax breaks over serving the common good.

The Bishops remind us that "one of our greatest blessings in the United States is our right and responsibility to participate in civic life. Everyone can and should participate. Even those who cannot vote have the right to have their voices heard on issues that affect their communities. The bishops note that "We need more, not less engagement in political life." They urge Catholics to live out Catholic principles by

running for office, working within political parties, and contributing money or time to campaigns, among other ways. In fact, the bishops stated that “responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation.”

Further, this Gospel comes at the perfect time this year to reflect on our rights and obligations as a citizen of our country and stewards of all God’s creation. As Catholics, we each have a duty and a responsibility to educate ourselves on the issues and to exercise our right to vote; being apathetic is not an option. There are several close races in this election. While we would never tell you how to vote, we will respectfully encourage you to exercise your right to vote. This is called Faithful Citizenship.

.....Gina.....

One issue in particular should gain your reflective thought and that is Initiative 1000. Some of you may have heard Sr. Sharon Park two weeks ago speak about this initiative. If I-1000 is voted into law, Washington State would become the 2nd state in the union to legalize Physician Assisted Suicide. Don’t be deceived into thinking that this is just a ‘choice’ issue.

In the United States, what becomes law has a way of also becoming what is morally right. We don’t have to look too far for other examples (*capital punishment, civil rights, abortion, and equal rights*). All evil looks deceptively like a good thing, it’s mostly invisible to the eye; in this case to ease suffering. Catholic social teaching would tell us that there needs to be checks and balances on the systems that support society, because as humans we are a mixed bag of generosity and selfishness. Sometimes it’s hard to figure out where we stand. It’s often good to remember the old saying that ‘we only take to heaven what we give away’ ... are we growing in our capacity to love each other and to be unselfish? I-1000 is a selfish expression against caring for the vulnerable.

I-1000 places the most vulnerable in the cross hairs; it provides minimal oversight through reporting and no mandatory counseling for terminal ill patients considering prematurely ending their lives. There is no requirement to notify family members who could help their loved one in making such a serious decision. Lastly, insurance companies are eagerly watching because this may become a way of ending their financial responsibilities to terminally ill subscribers. I-1000 whether you agree with the concept or not is a poorly written law with few safeguards and inadequate reporting mechanisms. Further, it sets a dangerous precedent.

Today, Jesus asks us to give to God what is God’s. Are our lives not God’s first and foremost? Is it not God’s decision when we are born and when we die? I-1000 removes God from the picture entirely. You still have 17 days to study I-1000, pray about the consequences, and make your choice. This may be one of those times when God’s plan may be different from what is being proposed by the state. Plan to use that time wisely to form your conscience, reinforce your faith and to show where you place God in your life. Whose image does your life bear?