

YEAR A - THE YEAR OF MATTHEW

THE HOLY GOSPEL

PENTECOST 18 OCTOBER 16, 2011



The Holy Gospel is according to St. Matthew the 22nd Chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. {16} So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. {17} Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or

not?" {18} But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? {19} Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. {20} Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" {21} They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." {22} When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon - October 16, 2011

Year A - Year of Matthew - Pentecost 18

Isaiah 45:1-7 Psalm 96:1-9, 10-13; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

To whom do we belong? What kind of person do we wish to be? We may not realize it, but those two questions underlie every day of our lives. With everything, we do, and every action we take, those two questions are somewhere near. We try to answer these questions. "I

belong to this group or that group. I belong to this party or that. I do this for a living, and that is who I am." All of these things are a way of tying to give us an identity.

Along with these two questions, we all live with images of ourselves. Some of the images are good. Some are bad. For most of us, the image we have is often tentative. It is easily swayed by people's reactions to what we say or do. Either criticism or flattery can have a hold on us.

Today, flattery is part of the text. Today, Jesus is confronted not with criticism as often the case. No, today he is confronted with flattery.

Entrapment begins with flattery. We love to be flattered. However, flattery is addictive, and it blinds us to the truth. When I was a social worker, I had to testify at prosecutions. One of the things we quickly learned was that if an attorney wanted to go after us, he would usually begin by flattering us. It would throw us off guard. It would make us vulnerable.

We humans love flattery because it gives us what we wish was true rather than what actually is true. It hides reality from us. Flattery is always insincere and therefore, it has an edge to it that holds within it destruction. We see such a thing in today's Gospel.

In today's Gospel, there is also something else. Jesus says something that dashes flattery with truth.

Jesus says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus boils reality down to an essential truth in that statement.

We see this sentence in today's reading from Matthew. Jesus and his closest disciples are in one of the temple courtyards in Jerusalem, where Jesus has been teaching. Much of that teaching has been in response to an earlier challenge to his authority. Toward the end of a series of teaching parables in Chapters 21 and 22, Matthew tells us, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds because the crowds regarded Jesus as a prophet."

Questions concerning Jesus' authority had been aired throughout his public ministry, but Matthew shows us that the tensions between Jesus and the temple authorities are now reaching critical proportions. Matthew writes, "the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said."

The temple authorities, the chief priests, as well as the Pharisees are determined to remove Jesus from the public eye. Now the Pharisees have brought members of the Herodians along. These Herodians are scary people. They have no qualms about using their power to see to the murder of enemies. They are supporters of King Herod, Rome's puppet king. As such, they are well accustomed to the ruthlessness that marks the Herod's family. Herod and his followers accommodated the Romans who occupy Israel. Consequently, when the Herodians show up to listen to Jesus, the dangerous authority of Caesar is now part the scene.

These powerful challengers surround Jesus on all sides. The Pharisees and Herodians begin by flattering Jesus, saying, "Teacher we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality."

Entrapment begins with flattery. It hides reality. It blurs real intent. Then, comes what is meant to be the killer question. This is the one that will trap Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Their question wants a yes or no answer. Yes, would mean that Jesus is prepared to abandon God's priorities to accommodate the Romans; the people would hate him for this. No, would mean Jesus is willing to side with rebel groups such as the Zealots who want the Romans out at all costs. This would bring about the wrath of Rome.

However, Jesus is not trapped by the flattery. He does not answer the question. He turns to the people nearest to him and asks for the coin that is used for the tax.

"Whose head is on this coin?" he asks. Since the coin is the Roman land-tax coin, the answer is "Caesar's." In other words, the coin be-

longs to Caesar; therefore, give it back to him. However, in this exchange, Jesus is saying something about to whom we belong and who we are. It says in the first chapter of Genesis, we are created “in the image and likeness” of God. You are created by God and belong to God; give your life to God.

Jesus represents the authority neither of the temple nor of the Roman governor. The future of the temple and Rome are not Jesus’ future. When Jesus says that Pharisee and Herodian alike should give Caesar his due, and give God his due, there is only one future at stake, and that is God’s future. For Matthew, as for us, the reality of that future lies with Jesus: the living face of God.

In these few simple verses of teaching done in the shadow of the temple courts, we are given the answer to the two questions that are part of every day of our lives. To whom do we belong? What kind of person do we wish to be?

Jesus is telling us that we are people made and created in the image and likeness of God. This is who we are. It is that simple. If this is who we are, we also know what kind of person we wish to be.

Unlike the Pharisees and Herodians, we do not define ourselves by who we are against, but by who created us. The Pharisees and Herodians were blinded by their need for power. It clouded who they were and in what image they were made. This too happens to us. That is why we come here to worship. We come here because this is a space set apart from the world, set apart from Caesar and devoted to God. So long as we come here, we can be reminded of what we are about and what we are.

The flattery and criticism of this world may shake us. However, in the end, this place tells us that we are God's, made in his image, saved by his Son, and redeemed to live in the hope, freedom, and life God provides.

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and the things that are God's give to God.” Give the world its due. For us, there is only one future at stake, and that is God’s future. Amen.