Spirituality
Scripture for Life

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The money of the United States bears the official national motto: “In God We Trust.” It’s a curious and sometimes contentious part of our history. Apparently, the motto first appeared on coins during the Civil War, a not so subtle assertion that God was on the side of the Union. During the height of the Cold War, when the atheistic Soviet Union was our most frightening enemy, Congress passed laws making the phrase the official motto of the United States and ordering that it should be printed on all U.S. paper currency.

When the motto and its exhibition have been challenged in court, the decisions have ruled that it does not favor the establishment of religion and therefore is not unconstitutional. A 2004 Court of Appeals ruling said that references to God on money or in the Pledge of Allegiance “have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content.” On the other extreme, President Teddy Roosevelt called references to God on coins sacrilegious. God and country, church and state, the debate has confounded Christians since the time of Jesus.

In today’s Gospel, we see the start of a strange alliance between Pharisees and Herodians, groups whose only commonality seemed to be their opposition to Jesus. In one sense, they might be taken as the representatives of strict religion and the folks who could drop all scruples and self-servingly support the local dynasty. When this odd combo of church and state factions questioned Jesus about the legitimacy of

paying taxes, they thought they had come up with the perfect dilemma. If Jesus said, “pay,” he implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the Roman occupation, pagan rule over God’s people. On the other hand, those people remembered that less than 30 years before this happened, a man called Judas the Galilean had been executed for starting a revolution based on refusing to pay taxes. His sons met the same fate in the year 47 CE. Tax resistance was dangerous in those days.

Jesus was never one to be bested in political theater. Just when they thought they had him on the hook, he reeled them in. It was time for show and tell. He asked for a coin. Whose picture was on it? The coin they carried displayed not only an image of Tiberius Caesar but also a written declaration that he was the son of the divine Augustus. The other side of the coin had the words *pontifex maximus* declaring that Caesar was the most high priest. The very sight of such a coin would rankle strongly religious or nationalistic Jews. For the Gospel writers, the memory of the coin was the height of irony.

Then Jesus responded to their interrogation. When they admitted that the coin bore an image of Caesar, he handed them a riddle: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus’ response would satisfy no purist. The righteous religious would see him as promoting capitulation to the pagans. The Herodians, the “if you can’t lick ‘em, join ‘em” crowd, would realize they had just been given a very tenuous pass. The underlying question is what could belong to Caesar that does not already belong to God? Jesus left it to each age to discern how to interpret that for their own times.

The Gospel gives us Jesus’ response to groups that were out to trap him. What about folks who are sincere in wondering when supporting Caesar stops being legitimate? When must we be conscientious objectors? There are a few details in the story that offer clues to the riddle. First of all, any practicing Jew who heard Jesus say something about what belongs to God would have heard echoes of prayers like Psalm 24 which begins, “The earth is the Lord’s and all it holds, the world and those who dwell in it.”

The second hint comes through the part of the story that Jesus didn’t emphasize. The coin the questioners were carrying was blasphemous to religious Jews. It symbolized all the institutions that tend to divinize themselves as the ultimate in importance or authority. The inscription on the coin could be compared to the

statement, “My country, right or wrong,” or any other declaration of absolute allegiance to anything on the Earth. That inscription and attitude cross the line giving to Caesar what belongs to God. Seen in that light, an answer to the riddle begins to appear. Caesar, the common good, society, can all make legitimate claims on us. We are responsible to create societies which serve the good of all. That’s what we owe to Caesar.

If the God in whom we trust is the God of Jesus, what we owe to God is a blank check.

ISAIAH 45: 1, 4-6

The oracle of Isaiah 45 shows us how the prophet understood God’s action in human history. In language that would shock the orthodox, Isaiah presents the Persian emperor and warrior Cyrus as God’s anointed one, literally a messiah. Unthinkable as it may seem, Isaiah quotes God as saying to Cyrus, “I formed you from the womb … I say of Cyrus, my shepherd … I will go before you and level the mountains … I will give you treasures … that you may know that I am Lord” (Isaiah 44:24-45:3). God used covenant language with a pagan!

The people may have longed for salvation, but they didn’t expect it to come via a foreign dictator. Oppressed people long for the moment when one of their own will rise and free them, showing the rightness of their cause and the greatness of their nation. Even if he acted as a benevolent dictator, Cyrus was an alien monarch. Unlike other emperors, Cyrus respected local cultures and religions, greatly diminishing the resentment and desire for rebellion of the conquered people. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their capital and even to rebuild their Temple. Thus Isaiah saw the saving hand of God in his rule.

The lesson that God can and does work through pagans and foreigners was a hard one to accept. While a people may appreciate the good that comes from someone like Cyrus, we humans cling to the tendency to think that all good people should think and believe as we do. Therefore, only those who are like us can do the works of God.

That partisan tendency can have the tragic effect of widening unnecessary breeches among peoples with different philosophies or belief systems. One example of that in more contemporary history was the knee-jerk condemnation of liberation theology

by people who refused to believe that anything tinged by socialism could bring about any good.

The Christian Scripture antidote to any approach which specializes in polarizing is found in statements like Jesus' advice to judge proposals by their fruits or Paul's assurance that God can make all things work for good for those who love God (Matthew 7:15-20, Romans 8:28). Isaiah could believe in Cyrus as God's servant not because of his creed but because of what Cyrus did for God's people.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-5b

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest document of the Christian Scriptures, probably written in the early 50's of the Common Era. As in most of his letters, Paul named his coauthors, Silvanus and Timothy who were also his coworkers, demonstrating that they worked in teams, thinking, teaching and writing together. This is just one of many signs that the early Christians theologized and evangelized in a collegial fashion. Silvanus, also known as Silas, is the least well-known of the three. We hear most about him in Acts 16-18. Timothy, apparently younger than the other two, was with Paul in many adventures and often acted as his messenger. The three of them were imprisoned together in Philippi just before going to Thessalonica (Acts 16).

While the opening of the Christian Scripture letters follows a format, there is also a theology embedded in how Paul adjusted the traditional letter form. Each noun tells us something about Paul, the community and their spirituality.

Paul addressed this letter to the "church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The word "church" (*ekklesia*) denoted an assembly or more broadly the people of God. It was neither a building nor an institution, but a living community. The second half of the statement "in God the Father…" indicates that this group became a community at God's initiative. God called them together in Christ. There was no other reason for this group to be together except for God's gracious call. The simple address of the letter reminds the community of how Paul sees them in relation to God and the world. It reminds us that being together as a church is different from any other grouping. Church is not a voluntary association but a community called together by God for God's own purpose.

Paul then prays the blessings of grace and peace for them. That choice of words modified the traditional greeting to become a blessing. The phrase “grace to you” was both a proclamation and a blessing. In Paul’s writing, grace was the grace of election, the fact of being chosen by God. When Paul prayed for grace as a blessing instead of proclaiming it as a *fait accompli*, we realize that he saw being chosen something God was doing continuously, something to which the community and each member should respond on a daily basis.

Peace (*shalom)* is the result of grace. It speaks of salvation which gives us peace with God. It describes the internal confidence in God that makes one genuinely imperturbable. It also refers to the graced mutuality the community is called to cultivate and enjoy. In sum, Paul’s blessing of grace and peace asks that the recipients may fully know the internal joy of living in God’s presence as a chosen community.

That blessing, which we hear often in our own liturgies, sums up the Christian lifestyle. If a community and each of its members can maintain an awareness of God’s gracious activity in their lives, they will know and be instruments of the peace which comes from being called together in God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

MATTHEW 22:15-21

In the past few weeks, we’ve heard Jesus narrate parables that called friends and enemies to conversion. That’s another way of saying that he told parables that angered his opposition. Today’s Gospel opens with the explanation that Jesus’ enemies were forging new alliances in their campaign to undo him. This is the first time we hear about the Herodians — a group that doesn’t need any more description than their name indicates; they aligned themselves with the brutal ruler, Herod Antipas. The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians, a very odd coalition, plan a verbal trap for Jesus.

The oil of insincerity oozes through the scene as they open their ambush with praise for Jesus as a truthful teacher who doesn’t pander to anyone. (This is not the only time that Jesus is in the awkward position of having hypocrites or demons praise him for who he really is.) The loquacious speakers finally get to their point and ask about the legitimacy of collaborating with the Romans by paying taxes. Lest anyone wonder what Jesus really thought about his questioners and their creative dilemma, he immediately addresses them as hypocrites, and makes it clear to everyone

listening that their intent is only to test him. They have no interest in looking for an answer and no personal investment in the question.

Disingenuous as they may be, their question is legitimate. If Jesus tells people to refuse to pay taxes, he's siding with rebels and perhaps calling down more wrath than the case warrants. On the other hand, paying taxes could be read as a sign of accepting and thereby legitimizing the rule of the pagan Romans. This is probably the first description of a church/state conflict in Christian history.

When Jesus asks to see a coin, the first thing we notice is that his questioners have Roman money, thereby collaborating with the system at least to the extent that they carry something that bears the sort of graven image forbidden by strict Jews. The injunction against images was a stringent application of the commandment in Exodus: "You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth" (20:4). While the application of that commandment forbad any sort of depiction of human beings or creatures, its intent was to forbid idolatry, the worship of or consecration to any person, creature or thing other than God.

When Jesus asked whose image was on the coin, the group's ability to produce one pointed out that they carried Roman money which featured an image of Caesar, the inscription on which called Caesar Augustus a divinity. Jesus didn't comment on the coin's idolatrous implications but neutralized the dichotomy, rising above it with a typically enigmatic response.

While our translation says "repay" to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, others say "give" or "render." Whichever translation one uses, the answer is a riddle. The first part is fairly simple: With some prayer and discernment, we can determine what belongs to Caesar. There may be some debate about government's legitimate rights, but at some point, there will be a limit to what the government can demand of citizens. We can be genuinely dedicated to the nation and the common good without falling into the idolatry of blind obedience. But when it comes to giving to God what belongs to God, what falls outside of that category?

Planning: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's Gospel raises the issue of the proper relationship between church and state, phrased in terms of the relationship between God and Caesar. The first reading raises a bit different, though related, question: Can God use non-believers to bring about God's will?

Jesus' words at the end of our Gospel passage are often misinterpreted to support the separation of church and state, or more precisely, the banishing of religion from governmental decisions. Certain realms are discerned to belong to God and other realms are assigned to Caesar. But this misses a fundamental fact: Everything belongs to God. There is no area of life that is excluded from God's concern, no area that can be managed properly without recognizing God's sovereignty over all creation.

This issue arises often in parish life when some people object to preaching on issues of social justice in church because all justice issues have political implications. Preachers should not mention climate change, for example, because one party insists it is not happening. Or preachers should not mention abortion because one party insists women should have complete freedom to kill the unborn for any reason. You can easily come up with a long list of topics that will provoke a negative reaction if they are mentioned in church.

But if everything really belongs to God, then no issue is beyond the church's concern or teaching. Preachers and planners should certainly try to avoid strictly partisan advocacy, but issues like climate change, immigration, budget cuts, taxation, living wages, abortion, the death penalty, etc. must be addressed in light of the Gospel.

Many of these issues concern national priorities and policies, but most of them also have local ramifications. We could press for action from Washington to deal with the ever-increasing effects of climate change, but we can also take steps locally to reduce our carbon footprint and care for creation. Such efforts may lead some people to recognize the need for global action as well.

Today's reading from the Isaiah presents an idea that was surely shocking to his first readers. He indicates that God used a pagan ruler to carry out God's will for Israel. Cyrus was the king of Persia. By his many conquests, he created the largest empire the world had yet seen. When he conquered Babylon, he allowed the Jewish captives to return to their former land. He even helped finance the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Isaiah calls Cyrus God's anointed, making him the only non-Jew to be given that title. It must have been shocking to his contemporaries, who had believed that God only chose anointed servants from among their own kind. It's a reminder God works in our world,

not just through our church or any institution or person.

Prayers: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today’s readings continue our reflection on who God is and what God expects of us. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this understanding gradually evolved among alternate views. We face similar challenges today. How does our faith relate to other important commitments we have, such as law, politics, etc. And who is this God in whom we believe? Jesus confronted these questions, and his answer is unambiguous and risky. How do we answer the questions in our own lives?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were subject, like us, to many loyalties: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were challenged in your commitment to God: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you showed us how to meet our commitments without fear: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray for ourselves and for all who live in a world filled with ambiguity.

Minister For all in the church whose faith is challenged by the expectations of others … we pray,

- For those throughout the world whose faith is endangered by political systems or cultural practices … we pray,
- For those whose religious beliefs infringe upon others … we pray,
- For the courage to challenge rules, laws or systems that compromise our faith … we pray,
- For the challenges that arise from different faith perspectives and their influence on public life … we pray,

- For those whose faith has led to acts of civil disobedience and for those whose work is to protect them … we pray,
- For those whose lives have been impacted negatively by rules, laws and policies … we pray,
- For all the needs of this community; for the sick and dying; and for those who have died … *(names)* … we pray,

Presider God, besides whom there is no other, we are called to love you while we fulfill the many responsibilities of our lives. Help us to discern what is important among our obligations and to be good citizens of the world, while we keep our eyes and hearts focused on you. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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