

22 October 2017 (29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Isaiah 45:1,4-6; Psalm 95(96):1,3-5,7-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21.

Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.

In today's gospel we see the Pharisees and the Herodians (those who supported King Herod who had been placed in command by the Roman invaders) try to trap Jesus in order to be able to put him away. The immediate context of this controversy is that each Jew had to pay a denarius (a day's wages) to the Romans. Obviously the Jews resented this. The trap was that if Jesus said that they had to pay the taxes, he would have upset many of his listeners; moreover, if he had said not to pay the tax, then he would have been branded as a revolutionary, and the Romans would have had reason to arrest him and put him away.

Jesus sees through the trap and gets out of it without committing himself either way. By asking his opponents to produce a denarius, he is showing how hypocritical they in fact are. Jews are prohibited to make an image of God or an idol, so they avoided using the Roman coins because they carried the image of the emperor, who declared himself to be a god. Jews instead used the Shekel. By being able to produce a denarius, the Pharisees and the Herodians showed that they were not living according to their Jewish customs, but were already supporting the Roman emperor.

Jesus' argument seems simple enough: since the denarius carries the image of the emperor, then it belongs to him and should be given back to him! But Jesus is not finished yet; he goes on to declare that in a similar way, whatever carries the image of God needs to be rendered back to God. This is a very profound teaching indeed.

In the book of Genesis we are told that God created man and woman in his own image and likeness; even creation itself speaks of God's presence as it points to its creator. If we have a duty to give to Caesar what belongs to him, then we have a greater duty to give back to God all that belongs to him!

As creator and ruler of the whole universe, all creation gives praise and belongs to God. As Christians we are baptised and re-born in Christ; our whole life belongs to God in Christ. I do have a very important duty to respect and obey the rules of the state, but the state itself and all that I am and do all belong to God. How do I give God all that belongs to him?

In one of his letters St Paul reminds us that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. God himself lives in us. Then I need to be careful that in this temple I do not install an image of any other idol. If I am not careful many things can take the place of God in my life and instead of building my life based on God's word and his will, I can build my life on work, money, alcohol or anything else that I allow to control me.

Once again Jesus invites us to place everything in its proper order by giving back to God all that belongs to him.

Fr Mario