

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

"A Taxing Situation"

A college student was taking his first philosophy exam and on the paper, was a single line that simply said, "Is this a question? – Discuss." After a short time, the student wrote, "If that is a question, then this is an answer." The student received an "A" on the exam. Trick questions need to be met head on when put to the test.

Speaking of trick questions – in today's Holy Gospel, Jesus was being set up by those who were seeking to force Him to choose between rebellion—which would allow them to charge Him before the Romans – or siding with the Romans. They were setting a very intricate trap for Our Lord; however, Jesus' Godly wisdom is demonstrated throughout the entire 22nd chapter of Matthew's Gospel, handling questions to keep His opponents at bay. This event is also reported in Luke 20:20-26 and Mark 12:13-17.

Jesus is confronted by two groups: the Pharisees and the Herodians. Pharisees were all about the Temple, the Law and the kingdom of the Jews, and the Herodians were supporters of Herod, the king of the Galilee and Peraea, who was put in power by the Romans. They worked together only when it suited them best – to get something! Testing Jesus' teaching here should not be a surprise at all.

If Jesus publicly takes the view characterized by those who are called "Zealots" (serving no king but God,) the Herodians can have him arrested. If Jesus rejects that view, which is the case; He may compromise and weaken His following of disciples. The third choice – tell the people they don't have to pay taxes – and then Jesus would be put to death! The Pharisees and Herodians question therefore, was a 'loaded question' that held dire consequences if the answer said anything negative about the taxes.

The religious leaders of Israel had one goal: they wanted to get rid of Jesus of Nazareth. They would do this through any means possible, even if it meant cooperating with lifelong enemies. The Pharisees were the "legalists" of the nation who opposed Rome and all attempts by Rome to intrude into the Jewish way of life. The Herodians actively supported the rule of Herod and favored making changes with the times as dictated by Rome. But those issues were less important to them than the pressing issue of getting rid of this Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth , so they sent a delegation to try to trick Jesus.

In first century Israel, the area near Jerusalem circulated its own copper coins, without the image of the emperor, which was totally offensive to Jewish tastes – but they were still considered Roman coins. Foreign coins, which bore the emperor's image and mention of his 'divine status,' were also in circulation, in the area where neither gold nor silver coins were permitted to be minted. The silver denarius, probably minted in Lyon, was the required coin to pay taxes in Judea and other places in the empire, and Jewish people had to use it whether they liked it or not. If Jesus' questioners here are concerned about paying Roman taxes, they

obviously should not be carrying this coin. The issue of paying tax to the Roman emperor was one of the hottest topics in the Middle East during Jesus' day.

These sly questioners began by complimenting Jesus – and boy they were laying it on “really thick” by saying: *‘Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.’* (Matthew 22:16) They then get to the carefully laid trap and ask Jesus: *“Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”* (Matthew 22:17) The Pharisees' plan to entrap Jesus failed because Jesus aptly sidestepped the problem they forced on Him. Jesus gave His disciples an example of how they could live as the people of God's kingdom living in a yet imperfect world which was governed by secular authorities. Jesus spoke plainly when He told them that it is right to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Jesus was not a Zealot or revolutionary looking to overthrow the Roman government. But at the same time, He did not put priority upon loyalty to secular government. If one gave to the state its regulated taxes – as we all do, all the more you were give to God His unrestricted due—the totality of one's being and substance, your existence, was to be given to God and nothing less! Loyalty to Caesar must always be set in the larger context and seen in relationship to the full submission of one's self to God. The bottom line for the disciple of Jesus is to *“give to God the things that are His.”* To clearly define what belongs to God – we need only to look at Psalm 24. Ultimately the answer is clear in Psalm 24:1 *“The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.”*

Now let's get back to the trap that was laid: If Jesus opposed tribute to Rome, then He could be arrested as a traitor; but if He favored tribute to Caesar, He would lose the hearts of the Jews who despised their Roman oppressive rulers. They thought that the Messiah was going to come and obliterate their oppressors. Jesus' reply shows that the true child of God has obligations both to God and to his country. While the image of Caesar was imprinted on the coin – the Image of God was imprinted on all of mankind; since we are made in His image – although distorted by sin, that image still was there – and would become clearer through the coming sacrifice of our Lord.

It was obvious that Jesus' questioners really did not believe in Him. Their question was, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Their cleverly contrived question appeared to have no clear-cut answer. Have you ever been in a situation like that? You know the old question: ‘do you still beat your wife?’ How do you answer that? Jesus was aware of the hypocrisy in their approach and also the implications His answer would have. And so, He answered their question by showing that government does have a rightful place in everyone's life and that you can be in subjection to government and God at the same time. Where does your heart lie? It is said if you look on your checkbook – you can see where your heart lies. Jesus asks them to show Him a denarius, the tribute coin, and they show that they themselves are carrying this hated currency – despite the fact that Jews were not allowed to put images of human faces on their coins. Jesus has them right where He wants them! Caesar's face was stamped on the coin and surrounding him was the message *“Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus”*

or “Son of God... high priest.” Seriously, how could any good Jew happily carry something like that around?

I do believe that there are three things that we need to take from this message today:

1. While we look ahead to being citizens of God’s Kingdom – we live here on this imperfect earth – and we must abide by the rules. That does not mean that we have to agree with them – but we must abide. “*Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.*”
2. Everything belongs to God – and as in Genesis – we are made caretakers – to preserve and care for what He has given to mankind. How many times have you been to a Holy Eucharist service and heard or sung the doxology when the offering is brought forward by the ushers – “*Praise God from Whom ALL blessings flow?*” Even Psalm 95 reminds us “*the sea is His for He made it and His hands have molded the dry land.*” “*Give to God the things that are God’s.*”
3. Whenever we are put to the test – Jesus has given us the way forward. Trusting in Him, the Holy Spirit will provide for us the words necessary for a solid defense.
 - Mark 13:11 “*do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.*” Jesus gave us those words to encourage us as a reminder that we are not alone in any situation, in any instance.

“*The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates.*” (Psalms 11:5) Testing gives us a clear opportunity to grow, with God’s help. He tests both the righteous and the wicked. For some, God’s tests become a refining fire, while for others they become an incinerator for destruction. We are not to ignore or defy the tests and challenges that come our way but instead we can use them as opportunities for us to grow – trusting in God and His care for us.

There are things in our lives that scare the dickens out of us – like when the results of a test come back and they say that there is something there. What do we do? We get on our knees – knowing that God will use all things for good – and we trust in Him.

I was reading recently in a commentary that this coin event was solely about the perfect example of the separation of church and state! Boy did this guy miss the point! He missed the point that everything belongs to God – every last bit of it – and we need to pay the dues that are required of us – but **we must never lose sight of the fact that in spite of who sits on the earthly throne – God sits on the heavenly throne and deserves our best – and deserves our all.** Jesus’ answered the question in a masterful way. When He was put to the test – His answer caused His detractors to simply walk away in awe – because His answer was solid, was true, and He pointed to the fact that we are to live in this world, but we are not of it. Our King is Almighty God and it is to Him that we owe all honor, glory and praise. Amen!