

## Reflection for the 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

*He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." At that He said to them. "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Matthew 22:20-21*

These two verses are taken from our Gospel Reading this Sunday in which we hear about the Pharisees going off to plot against Jesus and find a way to entrap Him. Their plan is to send their follows to Jesus with the Herodians and ask Jesus a question. The question that the Pharisees create to entrap Jesus is, "*Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?*" This is a great question that they ask Jesus to entrap Him they even setup the question by stating, "*Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status.*" The follows of the Pharisees and the Herodians ask Jesus this question to provide Him with the opportunity to deny the authority of Rome and to then be seen by the Roman Government as a revolutionary, denying the authority of Rome over the Holyland.

Before we get into Jesus' response to the question that is asked of Jesus in our Gospel Reading today, it might be helpful to explain or define the words, *Pharisees*, *Herodian*, and *Caesar*. Pharisees in the time of Jesus were members of a political party that believed in the resurrection and followed the legal tradition that ascribed not to the Bible but to the traditions of the Fathers. The Pharisees in the time of Jesus like the scribes of their day were well-known legal experts and due to this fact, there was an overlap in membership to the two groups.

To be call a Herodian in the time of Jesus would mean that a person was an influential Jewish supporter of the Herodian Dynasty. The Herodian Dynasty ruled all or parts of Palestine and neighboring areas in the 55 BC to 93 AD time frame. It should be noted in the New Testament that to be called a Herodian would mean that not only did one support the Herodian Dynasty, but that person would also naturally be an opponent of Jesus and what He stood for. In the time of Christ, the leadership of the Jewish People, had found a way to co-exist with the Roman Empire. Jesus with His words and deeds, threatened the delicate balance that existed in the time of Jesus in the Holyland.

The final word to explore or define for our Gospel Reading this Sunday would be *Caesar*. In defining this word, we could investigate the fact that Caesar was a Roman family name, but it is more important to see that this title and name became known as the title for Roman Emperors, and it was also used in the New Testament to represent the civil authority of the Roman Empire, that ruled over most of the known world in the time of Jesus.

Now that we have defined the words, *Pharisees*, *Herodians*, and *Caesar*, it might be time for us to take this knowledge and look once again at our Gospel Reading. Knowing who the Pharisees and Herodians are and their place in the power structure in the time of Jesus, we can understand their concern regarding the teachings and message of Jesus. So, they come up with a question to propose to Jesus which will force Him to affirm His support of the Roman Empire occupying Judea and Israel, or He will have to declare His desire for Judea and Israel to be free of the occupation of the Roman Empire. Jesus of course provides an answer that does not support the Roman Empire nor does His answer oppose the Roman Empire.

When Jesus is asked, "*Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?*" His response and answer providing us with an opportunity to explore the relationship that followers of Christ, should have with the world at large. Jesus' answer, "*Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God,*" provides us with an opportunity to ponder and reflect on how our relationship to government, and society can and should be affected by our belief in Jesus Christ. Clearly from the first century to our present day, our Catholic faith has a big impact on our relationship with the world at large, and in particular our relationship with our government, and the laws of the land.

For the first three centuries of our faith, we were a Church that was persecuted by the Roman Empire. There have been governments since the Roman Empire that have also persecuted those who believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and Savior of the world. Christianity of course is not the only religion throughout the history of humanity that has been persecuted. But knowing that governments do not always support faith-based groups we can ponder the message that Jesus Christ gives us today in our Gospel Reading when He answers the question that is asked of him by the Pharisees and Herodians. Jesus provides a message that can speak to not just followers of Christ but to all peoples. The message that Jesus provides us in our Gospel Reading this Sunday is that God has created us, and all we are and all we hope to be. Yes, there are governments in this world, and they have an important role in providing for the safety and well-being of humanity. But when a government through its action or lack of action causes harm to individuals or to groups, then individuals and groups inside of outside of the area that the said government controls have an obligation to work for change. This obligation comes from the fact that we have been created by a loving God who wishes and plans for the very best for His creation.