

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

Is 45:1, 4-6

Ps 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

I Thes 1:1-5b

Mt 22:15-21

George F. Riley, O.S.A.

“Give to God what is God’s.” The question for us is, “What is God’s?” The answer for each of us depends upon what we believe and why we believe it.

We are told that we live in a world come of age. We are told that we have arrived intellectually in this scientific age. We are told that we have climbed to a new level of sophistication in understanding and satisfying our personal needs. We are told that we have reached the point where we can be more honest, more honest to God, about what we believe.

But there is something deeply disturbing about all of this. Without in any way disparaging the importance of clear thinking in the area of what we believe, this can also be a trap. All of the intellectualizing that is going on can be one of the most subtle and effective ways of escaping confrontation with God down at the deeper levels of our being.

The pharisees who confront Jesus in today’s gospel lesson are troubled by His presence for three reasons:

1. Jesus is preaching a religion of the spirit in contrast to their emphasis on religious law.
2. Jesus is closely identifying with the poor and the downtrodden, in contrast to the pharisees’ lofty status as a comfortable religious elite.
3. Jesus’ call for radical reversal of the pharisees’ values is attracting a following.

For these reasons, the pharisees see Jesus as a threat to their exalted status. Consequently, they try to discredit him with a “loaded” question. “Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not?” The question is designed as a trap.

Britain’s “House of Commons” sessions are convened according to a strict ritual. The “Speaker of the House” leads a solemn procession into the legislative hall. Then he is led into the visitors’ hall by a herald who commands the spectators to the colorful ceremony to respectfully remove their hats as the procession passes by. On one occasion, the herald spotted an old friend named “Neal” standing in the crowd. Impulsively, he cried out, “Neal! Neal!” And all the spectators obediently dropped to their knees. The story brings us back to the question of how to respectfully tip our hats to our earthly rules and simultaneously to solemnly kneel before the rule of God.

Jesus did not give a “yes” or “no” answer to the pharisees. By his answer he merely threw the question back at them. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” he replied --still leaving the question, “What is Caesar’s, what is God’s?”

This was the pharisees’ problem, the apostles’ problem, and it is our problem. Governments change, forms of government change, national boundaries change, social conditions change, entire cultures and civilizations change, but the problem does not change. What is God’s, what is Caesar’s? Jesus’ real answer is given in response to the question of which commandment in the Jewish law was the greatest. “You shall love the Lord your God,” Jesus said, “with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37-38). Actually Jesus spent his whole life and ministry interpreting this law for all times and places and situations. The two great commandments in the Jewish law, he said, are inseparable. You cannot fulfill the first if you are not fulfilling the second. Loving God and not loving your neighbor is a contradiction.

Sometimes a choice is clear-cut when it comes to God and state. Hitler’s Naziism is one example. When a government meddles with men’s God-given rights --”life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as the U.S. Declaration of Independence puts it -- it seeks, in effect, to usurp God’s creative role, to redo creation so to speak. There are times when noble patriotism comes in the form of an emphatic “No!” There are times when the true patriot must say, “This nation under God” not in order to provide comfort but to disturb. There are times when “This nation under God” must mean “This nation under the judgment of God, as well as under his protection.

The question “What is God’s and what is Caesar’s?” converge in the one and only conscience of the person who would seek to answer it. The conscience that tells a person that all men are made in God’s image and all men possess the inherent, God-given right to love and respect, is the same conscience that tells that person when to oppose a political system which denies man’s inherent dignity.