

29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

When he went hunting Louis XIV never wore gloves, even in the coldest weather. One day two French peasants paused from their work in the fields to watch the king ride past in the hunt. One voiced his surprise that the king took no precaution against the cold. “Gee, his hands must be freezing,” he said. The other replied: “Why should they be freezing? He always has **his** hands in **our** pockets.”

In today’s Gospel the issue is about Caesar’s right to have his hand in Jewish pockets. Two groups come to confront Jesus; they are members of the Pharisees’ sect and the Herodians. The Pharisees resented paying taxes to a foreign king as an infringement of the divine right of God. The Herodians, on the other hand, were supporters of Herod the Great and his family. They favoured collaboration with the Romans and paying taxes to Caesar. These two groups were unnatural associates. If, as Shakespeare noted, “Misery acquaints a man with strange bed-fellows”, the same could be said of hatred. The Pharisees and the Herodians are united in their common desire to eliminate Jesus.

Matthew has already developed the story of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, who now appear committed to bringing about the downfall of the prophet from Nazareth. Fearing for their own reputation, which has already suffered in open debate with Jesus, they now try to entrap him. Jesus has already shown that he is not intimidated by the religious authorities into a necessary agreement with their practices; they now test him to see if Caesar’s imposed rule has intimidated him into agreeing to pay the annual poll tax.

The delegation tries to lay the ground for the charge of treason: if Jesus denies the need to pay tax to Caesar, he could be charged with treason before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Failing that, if Jesus answers affirmatively, he will alienate the majority of his fellow countrymen. Either way, it appears that Jesus has to lose. He’s on a hiding to nothing.

As a preface to their question, the spies flatter Jesus by addressing him as “Master” and profess their admiration for his impartial teaching of the ways of God. Only then do they ask the question – whether it is lawful for God’s people to pay tribute to Caesar – a question which they have loaded in favour of a negative reply. The tax they refer to is the annual poll tax of one denarius, which was payable to the imperial exchequer by

everyone in the land, from the age of puberty to the age of sixty-five. When the tax was first introduced it was the cause of riots and bloodshed. As an annual reminder of Israel's subjugation to Rome, it still caused grievance among the people.

Mathew mentions that Jesus is aware of his questioners' malice. He asks to be shown the money for the tax. They hand him a denarius, the silver coin which bore the image and the inscription of the emperor Tiberius. The fact that Jesus' questioners can produce the Roman coin might suggest that they recognize the rule of Caesar: many pious Jews refused to use the denarius because it violated the Mosaic prohibition against images.

In his reply Jesus does not answer the original question, but makes an announcement which seems engagingly vague: "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God."

Jesus, however, does not specify the things that belong to Caesar, for Caesar does not possess anything *independently* of God; he does not need to specify the things that belong to God, since everything does. Since God has dominion over the whole of creation, *Caesar's relative power is subservient to the ultimate power of God.*

All authority and power have to be evaluated in the light of God's plan. Jesus' questioners could hardly have marveled at his reply if the only thing he did was to avoid a question by a debating trick. In his reply, Jesus gives a teaching: it is for the people to evaluate whether in demanding tribute, Caesar is reflecting the things of God. Religious people and Institutions are not above or exempt from the laws of the State. Political authority has a legitimate role in building a safe and just society for all members of the community. But the political arena is not a territory protected from religious evaluation and criticism. If Caesar is subservient to God, then Caesar's laws are open to Christian evaluation. In the world of politics it often seems that nothing is sacred. In God's world – **everything** is!!