

Homily by Fr. Anthony Davis

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's".

October 18, 2020

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Is 45:1, 44-6 1; Thess 1:1-5; Mt 22:15-21

What do we owe God and our neighbor? Scripture tells us to give to everyone whatever is their due and to "owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom. 13:6-8). In today's Gospel, the Jewish authorities sought to trap Jesus in a religious-state issue. The Jews resented their foreign rulers and despised paying taxes to Caesar. And so they posed a dilemma to test Jesus to see if he was loyal to them and to their understanding of religion.

Jesus avoided their trap by confronting them with the image of a coin. Coinage in the ancient world had significant political power, and in a certain sense, was regarded as the personal property of the ruler. Hence where the coin was valid the ruler held political sway over the people. Since the Jews used the Roman currency, Jesus explained that what belonged to Caesar must be given to Caesar, but they should also give to God, what belongs to God.

The usual misinterpretation that this teaching of Jesus brings is that, human affairs are divided into two areas: the spiritual side which belongs to God and God's ministers, and the secular side which belongs to civil authorities.

Does Jesus really teach this kind of dualistic view of human existence? NO. What then is Jesus teaching here regarding loyalty to civil authority? Instead of answering the direct question of whether one should pay the forced tribute to Caesar or not, Jesus raises the question to another level- that of the principle of justice.

Jesus is recommending not absolute but qualified loyalty. That is to say, if a government provides needed goods and services then we must, in justice, give back to the government our loyalty and support. But where a government is a dictatorship that imposes itself on the people's will, a leech that sucks itself fat from the life-blood of the people and provides no services, a government that creates division and hatred among the people instead of fostering unity and strength and peace, what then do the people have to give back? To such despotic governments that create anarchy, the principle of justice does not demand that people give their loyalty and support.

This story has another deeper meaning as well. Since the Jews used the Roman currency, Jesus explained that what belonged to Caesar must be given to Caesar. But more importantly, we, too, have been stamped with God's image since we are created in his own likeness - "God created man in his own image...male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:26-27).

Consequently, we rightfully belong not to ourselves, but to God who created us and redeemed us in the precious blood of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Furthermore, "If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's (Rom.14:8).

Serving God is basically a matter of justice. Therefore, if God has given us all that we are and have, then we are bound in justice to give back to God some gratitude, loyalty, and service. That's why St. Paul says: "I urge you brothers and sisters, in God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is your true and proper worship..." (Rom. 12:1). Do you then, acknowledge that your life and everything you possess belongs to God and not to yourself? And do you give to God what rightfully belongs to him?