

Homily 10 18 20 29th Sunday A The Corona Homilies # 31

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Is 45:1, 4-6 Thes 1: 1-5b Mt 22: 15-21

We have been discussing and debating the Covid virus since it first appeared and more so when it impacted our lives in such dramatic fashion. Now we are in debate season not just for the pandemic but for politics. Political debates can be both informative and brutal. Each person is trying to make a case they are the one who deserves your vote. At times they are also trying to tell you the other person is not only wrong in their positions but actually a bad person. Yet as children of the same Creator we cannot demonize someone just because they do not agree with us politically.

Debates during an election season are like sport. You have a game plan and try to trick the opponent with the way you put your opponent on the spot or the use of a zippy one liner. Sometimes real issues fall to the side.

The gospels of the next three weeks talk about debates and tricks as well. These are confrontations of Jesus with the authorities in the temple precincts. In the debates Jesus' enemies are trying to discredit him completely. Matthew places these in the temple precincts to show Jesus' authority of teaching as the Messiah. For the Jew that authority is based in the temple. Matthew does this to bring Jews to Jesus and at the same time assure Jewish Christians they made the right choice.

The question is how do we live according to the gospel, which essentially is to live by the heart rather than the letter of the law. There are a series of four debates of Jesus with different leaders, but especially with Pharisees, since they were seen as the main Jewish authority. Matthew shows Jews that Jesus has more authority and his enemies cannot trick him.

The debates are in the form of Q & A sessions near the end of Jesus' life. In this story the opponents of Jesus try to trap him into recognizing a divine emperor.

You know they are setting up a trap when they call Jesus “teacher” since it is Matthew’s flag for a person of little or no faith. It was a politically charged environment at that time. Does this sound familiar today?

The Herodians are only mentioned here and one other place in Mark. They are supporters of King Herod who had been imposed by Rome. The Pharisees are not happy with Herod, but if they can use his supporters to get Jesus they will. We might call this the politics of convenience not conviction. It has existed for centuries. The trick question is about paying taxes to Caesar. If Jesus supports the tax he is unpopular with the people and against the Pharisees. If he opposes it he is a revolutionary, against Caesar and the Herodians. Someone will not be happy with the answer. Either way, Jesus will suffer. That was the point. They did not care about the answer. They just wanted to trap Jesus.

Jesus knows their malice. This political trap refers back to the temptation in the desert by the evil one who offers to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world. So this is more than just a trick question. He is being tempted by the evil one to get involved in political power struggles. The early Church, for which Matthew writes, was struggling in how it should relate to the state, namely Caesar. The Church at times supports the state, at times resists the state. Early Christians resisted bowing to gods or seeing Caesar as god. In some cases it cost them their lives.

Jesus simply says that we have to pay for the things the government gives, especially if we are using the roads, security, and other services, but God is overarching, and our allegiance to God must always come first. A priest told me last year a parishioner in counseling had told him he was a member of a political party first, then a Catholic after that. I thought to myself, “Tell that to St Peter at the pearly gates!” At any rate it seems like a clear contradiction of this gospel. Election season might be a good time to think about that.

The Pharisees especially hated the tax because it had to be paid with a coin bearing the image of Caesar. They disliked human images, which were prohibited by their law. On top of that, the coin’s writing identified the image as “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus,” thus attributing divinity to

Caesar as son of the divine. That would have been blasphemy for the Jews and to even have a coin in your possession or touch a coin was a form of cooperating in the blasphemy. Yet, when Jesus asks to see a coin, one is produced by them immediately. They showed that they used the coin without any problem. It is compounded by the fact they were in the temple precincts thus adding profaning the sacred place with a blasphemous image. I can just see the one producing it, realizing Jesus has just blown his cover, saying to himself, "Oops!" Their hypocrisy is clear.

Jesus begins his answer. Caesar is paid the coin that bears his image, but we need to return to God what bears His image, namely US! Even though the word "give" is used for both payments, the original wording indicates giving to God is really returning to God what God has given us. The challenge to the Pharisees is to return to God what they have not given. The response to God must be total.

Our primary citizenship is with the Kingdom of God. Are we as careful of paying God what he is due as we are paying our taxes? If Caesar is God or if Caesar is the devil the answers are easy, but what if he is neither? Then the answers are not simple and we have to wrestle with the answers using God as our guide. What we owe Caesar is to make the country reflect the values of God, not any party or person

Do we really believe that a terrorist is created in God's image, or a cohabitating couple or a gay person or a person married multiple times? What about a refugee fleeing violence or poverty and trying to seek a better life or the homeless under a bridge? It is so easy to think of someone not like me as not as good as I am. However, our teaching says they and all other humans are also the face of God. Do you see yourself with all your baggage as the image of God? How can you give to God what belongs to God?

Jesus additionally might have been telling us to not be so dependent on money. To liberate ourselves from the excessive attachment to money is to live in the freedom of God's children. That is especially hard in our country and in our culture where buying and spending is so ingrained in our lifestyle.

Pope Francis said recently of the Covid pandemic, “Having failed to show solidarity in wealth and in the sharing of resources, we have learned to experience solidarity in suffering.” Maybe the worldwide suffering and personally knowing people who have suffered and even died will help us put in perspective what God has given us and our obligation to return what is God’s. We need to pray and work for healing from this time of pandemic. I read an article recently that said the word “healing” comes from the word “whole.” Healing, then is a return to “wholeness” not a return to “sameness.” We need to pray and work that we and this world will be healed, made better and made whole.

St Paul tells the Thessalonians in the second reading that the gospel is not mere words, but it is power, the power to change your life and help change the world. Every morning look in that mirror and see that image of God. You know it is not perfect, so it can help you to see others in the image of God as well.

Return to God today what is God’s. Can you do it?

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