

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 22, 2017

Fr. Michael Renninger – St. Mary’s Church, Richmond

“Who do you think you are, the King of England?”

When I was growing up, one of our neighbors was - how shall I put this? – a SPOILED child! Whenever we visited his house, it was clear to us that this little boy was the center of the family’s attention. He ruled the roost at home. Mom and dad set no limits for him. I never saw him get corrected by his parents. They never said “no.”

Growing up in that environment, that little boy assumed that he *was* the center of the universe. He made constant demands – and they were met. He interrupted when adults were speaking – because he had been taught that his were the only thoughts that mattered. His tantrums determined the family’s schedule, dinner menu, even vacation plans.

But every once in a while, his grandmother came to visit! And she brought some sanity to the household.

When her grandson interrupted an adult, grandmom would say, “Don’t interrupt. Who do you think you are? The king of England?” If she made a delicious dinner and the child announced that he wouldn’t eat it, she responded, “You will eat it or you will go to be hungry. Who do you think you are? The king of England?”

Thanks to grandma, this little boy slowly learned that the universe did not revolve around him. His demands would not be met. His desire to control everyone around him was not going to be fulfilled. He was not, after all, the king of England.

There was a time, long ago, when kings and queens really *were* the center of the universe. And there was a time when men named Caesar were in charge of everything. The lives of everyone depended on the whims of Caesar. When Caesar said jump, you asked “how high.” When Caesar said, “pay taxes,” you paid whatever he asked. He was Caesar. He got what he wanted.

Please remember that as we ponder and explore today’s Gospel, where the religious leaders plot to entrap Jesus. The Pharisees and representatives of King Herod come to Jesus with a question deigned to trap him. “Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

If Jesus says, “Yes, pay the taxes,” then they will denounce him for supporting the Romans, who have taken over and occupied the land of Israel. If Jesus says, “Don’t pay the taxes,” then they will accuse him of rebellion against Caesar.

But Jesus won't be drawn into their plotting. Instead, He asks – 'Whose face is carved on the coin? Whose name is inscribed there? That's who it belongs to!'

It's a very practical response: there are always Caesars in the world, always earthly rulers who will impose taxes and demand a certain obedience.

Jesus very calmly says, "Whose name is on the coin? Whose image is stamped on the money you use to pay the tax?" And with that, Jesus has changed the conversation. If it has Caesar's name on it, then you can give it to Caesar. If it has God's name on it, give it to God.

Jesus has given an excellent answer.

Except... people have turned Jesus' excellent answer into an excellent *excuse*. I once had a conversation with a very successful Catholic business man. He spoke honestly about the moral dilemmas he faced each day. How he was constantly tempted to cut corners, tell lies, betray trusts, do the wrong thing – in order to *succeed*. He basically admitted to me that, although he was Catholic on the Sunday, he found it nearly impossible to put the Gospel into practice Monday through Friday.

That's when the man said to me, "So, I guess I'm 'giving to Caesar' Monday through Friday, and I 'give to God' on Sunday."

Which is, of course, an excuse. But it is not excusable. When Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's," he was NOT giving us permission to live compartmentalized, divided lives. He was not telling us that God gets 'this much' of our lives, and the 'real world' gets the rest. Christ always calls us to be people of integrity.

Recall what Jesus said – 'Whose image is on the coin? Whose name is inscribed there?' Well, what I should have said to that business man is this: 'in whose image were YOU created? And whose name was poured upon your forehead on the day you were baptized?'

The coin belongs to Caesar, because his image is on it, and his name is on it. But YOU... YOU belong to God...because you are created in the Divine Image. And God's name – "Father, Son, Holy Spirit" - was forever inscribed on you in the waters of baptism.

You belong to God. Every part of you. Every aspect of you. Every action of you.

God's name is on you, because you belong to God. Christ's cross is marked on you, because you belong to Christ. God's image is deep within you. You belong to God.

The most important parts of human life only make sense if we remember that they belong to God. The deepest yearning of our hearts, the deepest longings for fulfillment, the deepest hunger we have for truth, for meaning, for hope – all of that will only find fulfillment if we remember that we belong to God. The most important parts of our lives belong to God.

We get into deep trouble when we allow earthly, created things, to try to fill those parts of us that only God can fill. We get into trouble when we expect earthly Caesars to give meaning to every fiber of our being.

Yet it is happening all the time. For instance, I think that one of the root causes of so much of our cultural anger today is that we have stopped turning to God for our hope and meaning. Instead, we now expect politicians to save us, bring us happiness, make us feel fulfilled. And, despite their promises, no human being can do all of that. Listen to the language that politicians on the left and right use – it sounds almost messianic. They can never deliver on all of their promises.

But in exchange, politicians and politics have become a new Caesar. They want to control all of you. And we allow them too. We watch cable TV 24 hours a day. We hear politicians talking 24 hours a day. We turn to them with our hopes and fears, 24 hours a day. I wonder what would happen if every Catholic in the USA that has become addicted to political TV, webpages and talk radio, would make a commitment to cut all of that out for the next month, and instead promised to pray, study the faith, and serve their neighbors for the exact same amount of time.

If we did that, all the worldly Caesars would be put in their place, and we would be giving to God what belongs to God.

There are lots of people and things who want to be Caesar in your life. They want to demand your entire obedience and service. For those who are addicted, the object of their addiction has become the new Caesar. For those who focus solely on money and ambition, Success is the new Caesar. For those who are unfaithful to their spouse, lustful in their hearts, angry all the time, a new Caesar is trying to control your life.

But your life, your love, your heart does not belong to any Caesar. You belong to God. And it is in God that you will find your heart's desire.

And if anyone or anything else tries to control or manipulate you, just look them square in the eye and ask the life changing question: “who do you think you are? The king of England?”