

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 15, 2011

Today's gospel reading is one that's very often quoted. It raises all kinds of juicy issues that are great food for thought. Jesus is once again sparring with the Jewish leadership -- this is the fourth week in a row now that our gospel stories have featured some aspect of this -- and today the Pharisees and Herodians try to trip Jesus up on the subject of taxes -- whether paying taxes is lawful according to Jewish religious law. Of course it was lawful by Roman law -- they made the law. This was a question of religious law.

Now you just heard the story -- Jesus asks them to produce a tax coin, and asks them about whose image and inscription are on it, and right there, they are caught, because remember, the Romans considered their emperor to be a god, and so this particular tax coin would be considered by the Jews to be a graven image of a false god. So when Jesus says "Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar," he's not just turning the question back on them, he's also telling them to rid themselves of this idolatrous money. Don't keep Caesar's image or his money, don't use it for your own profit in any way, give it back to Caesar. Just that answer was strong enough to silence them, but then Jesus adds, "And give to God what belongs to God."

I love that story. I can imagine the Pharisees just fuming, I can almost smell the smoke curling out of their ears -- can't you? But let's not leave the story there, with us all feeling good about how Jesus slipped out of their grasp again. Let's look at the question that Jesus is implying right at the end when he says to give to God what belongs to God. What does belong to God? And since the gospel today starts with the question of taxation, let's step out on a limb and consider that question too. What about the role of taxes? You see, we're not Israel living under the domination of a foreign power, when taxes were universally hated because the Jewish people were being made to pay for their own oppression. For us, today, we're a free people; we're a democracy. So for us, ideally, taxation is created by the authority of our common community, for the use of this community. As a faith community, what do we believe about how our taxes should be used? What does our God expect from us?

For the last 7 or 8 years now, we've had over on the wall between the church and the hall a listing of the Seven Foundations of Catholic Social Teaching. These foundation statements are distilled from our sacred scripture and drawn from our church teachings in major documents and papal encyclicals. Today I'd like to recall Foundation number three, which is about Rights and Responsibilities: "**All people have a fundamental right to life, faith, family** -- so far, it doesn't seem too controversial...but it goes on -- All people have **a fundamental right to food, shelter, health care, education, employment, and a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.** It doesn't stop there. **With these rights each person also has a responsibility to respect and secure these rights for all people. Government too has a responsibility to promote dignity, to protect these rights, and to provide for the common good.**"

That says it all very succinctly, I think: the basic rights that all people have; the responsibility that each of us has, as a follower of Jesus, to help secure these rights for others; and the responsibility that government has to protect these rights and provide for the common good.

Now, I propose to you that this is what our taxes should be for. We have a marvelous economic system, and it has served most of us here today very well. But left to itself, it doesn't provide for the weak, the frail, and the poor because there's no profit to be made in providing food, shelter, health care, or education to those who just don't have the money to make those things profitable. And so we, as individuals of faith, have a personal responsibility to go beyond our economic system and help secure those rights for others. Not only that, as a community of faith, we publicly teach that government must protect and secure those rights in providing for the common good -- that's why our Church advocates for government to fulfill this proper role. But government in turn can't protect these rights without the means to do it – and so that is a very fundamental role for the taxes we pay. And not only that, we here today, and Christians everywhere must have the courage as a people of faith to raise this faith perspective in the public arena; which brings us to today, because the wider public discourse on these topics has clearly lost its way.

We all probably recognize that engaging this topic as a matter of our faith is not easy, because there is so much intense emotion around the topic of government and the subject of taxes, particularly right now. And so in response to that, starting sometime in January, our parish Social Justice Commission will sponsor an eight-week program called ***Living Solidarity***. The program is designed to engage the question, *What kind of society do we wish to become?* Its focus will be on ***Government, the Federal Budget, and the Common Good***. It will be about our Catholic values, not our personal opinions, but I predict it will nonetheless be a very lively program – especially since it will be offered right during the beginning weeks of the presidential primaries. But that's OK – whoever said that Church is boring?

Finally, as we turn to our Eucharist this evening, I invite you to consider the early Christian communities and their fresh enthusiasm for the life of the risen Jesus. Remember the way they shared everything they had so that everyone in the community would be provided for. And as you receive our Lord Jesus tonight, I invite you to ask him to give you, to give all of us here this evening, to give all our brothers and sisters across the land, a sharing of the same spirit that inspired those early Christians.

Deacon Denny Duffell