

28 Sunday A
Matthew 22:15-21

St. John Paul II

2017
Isaiah 45:5

Matthew's gospel is 28 chapters in length.

Chapter 26 begins the passion narrative.

Chapter 22 then, which we read from today, is well into the 3rd year of public ministry for Jesus.

He has already worked most of his miracles...

Taught most of his lessons, and explained most of his parables,
and now he is beginning to look toward his death and resurrection.

I say all this because you would think that by now, after 3 years of trying,
the Pharisees would have thought twice before trying to trick Jesus again.

Yet here we go.

And they begin with the butter up...

Jesus we know you are a truthful man.

We know you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

We know you don't give into peer pressure.

And you're not concerned with being popular.

I mean they lay it on deep...

And then they ask Jesus the question...

the one question that they think can trap him.

At the conclusion of Jesus' answer, right after he says,

Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.

Right after that Matthew writes this:

When they heard this they were amazed, and leaving him they went away.

That's the nice way of saying: They walked off with their tails between their legs.

So what exactly transpired in between?

When the Pharisees asked about the paying the tax...

they were asking about a particular tax, one called the census tax...

Now this wasn't the only tax Jewish people paid...

there was the land tax, there was the temple tax, there was the custom tax.

But they asked him about the census tax...and this was a particularly hated tax.

Why?

Because this was a tax for just being alive...

a tax that every Jewish man, woman, and slave had to pay
just because they were breathing Roman air.

It was as if the Romans and their leader, Caesar, were saying
not only do we own your land, and your temple, and your property...
but we also own you!

Not only that, but it was a tax that reminded the Jewish people
that the Romans believed that Caesar was god on earth.

And to make that clear, there was special coin that was used
and it had the imprint of Caesar right on it.

So when they asked Jesus whether it was lawful to pay the census tax or not,
It put Jesus in a real bind...If he says pay it,
then he violates Jewish law by acknowledging Caesar as god.
If he says don't pay it, he becomes a rebel against the state.

So Jesus is in a catch 22...and he handles the situation...
as he had done with every one of their traps before...masterfully...

First of all, he calls them hypocrites...and then he asks them to see the coin...
And unbeknownst to them, when they show it to him...he has them.

Because by their simply having the coin in their possession, it shows
that they are already participating in the oppression of the Jewish people,
they are already complicit in the Roman occupation.

The coin itself was a violation of Jewish law
because it was a graven image of one who made himself out to be god.

And then Jesus asks them the question: whose image is this and who's inscription
Of course they respond Caesar to which Jesus utters his famous line,
"Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God."

Unfortunately this line has come to represent a thought
that Jesus is calling for a separation of Church and state...
or at least a thought that religion and politics don't mix...
But that's the farthest thing from the mind of Jesus.

What this Gospel confrontation was meant to do was to urge each of them
And to urge each one of us

to recognize to whom we actually belong,
and in whose image we are created.
It is a reminder that our true allegiance isn't to any modern-day Caesar,
Our true allegiance is to God.

The imaged stamped on the census tax coin was the image of Caesar...
The imaged stamped on our hearts is the image of God.

Isaiah, in our first reading today, reminds us of the words of God to Cyrus:

I am the Lord and there is no other...

Jesus in our gospel reminds us that we do owe the census tax...

We owe the tax for being alive

the tax for the air we breathe, the tax for the life we have been given,

we owe that, in fact we owe everything,

to the one who is stamped on our hearts.

We owe it all to God.