

Wednesday after Trinity XXIII

6th November 2024

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May I speak these words in the name of God: +Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.”

In history, this has often been taken as a commandment to obey the ruling authorities and pay the taxes that are due to them. In a sermon on the text, Church reformer Martin Luther says that our Lord “confirms the worldly sword of government” and commands us to “obey” the “magistrates, princes and masters”.¹ For the record, the sentiment is so commonplace that Google’s new AI tool also more or less concurs with Herr Luther’s reading of the passage.

But I confess I have great trouble with the idea that this or any verse of Scripture can offer a divine sanctioning of all state authority, or even a tacit acceptance of any government policies (which are being funded through the taxes we are compelled to pay). What of those governors, then, who disobey God, who disrespect human life, who persecute the Church and punish believers? From our own history we know that *Christian* leaders have been some of the worst offenders: in different ages of the life of the Church, Christian leaders have been behind iconoclastic movements and the persecution of the monasteries. Our own leaders are bad enough, so is the authority of every Ayatollah and every Commissar really to be respected and obeyed in every instance?

In our reading for today, we see that the Pharisees and Herodians, these sophists who have no love for truth, try to snare our Lord in a trap carefully laid. They ask him whether they should pay the poll tax of one denarius per year. If he says yes, he risks losing all credibility with his own people, a people living under foreign rule whose ancestral lands are under occupation, a people who resisted the tax. If he says no, he is also done for: this grand troublemaker in Jewry will be out of their hair because the Romans will deal with him as a seditious element.

But our Lord’s solution – his “master stroke” here – is not really about politics or taxes at all.² “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” He does not fall into their trap by laying down some political or economic manifesto for which he would only be indicted later; he instead keeps his head far above the temporal things, speaking only of God – bringing the whole sordid conversation back to God, back to His divine life which is the source of all life.

Rulers and powers have their place in God’s order but the real commandment here is not one to obey every word out of their mouths or every edict that has their approval; it is the commandment to give ourselves fully to God. The coins may belong to Caesar, but man belongs to God.

Because the face of Caesar is stamped onto every coin, these coins should flow back to him, being the one for whom they were marked. Likewise, because every man has been made in the image of

¹Luther’s Sermon on Matthew 22:15-22, <https://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity23/LutherGospel.html>.

²Luther.

God, man belongs to God, the one who made him. According to St Augustine's explication of this passage in Matthew's Gospel, "Christ's coin is man. In him is Christ's image, in him Christ's name, Christ's gifts, Christ's rules of duty".³

The implication of this, that we are Christ's own, the bearers of the very image of God, is actually far more daunting than being told simply to obey or not to obey the rulers. It is certainly not what the Pharisees and Herodians who challenged our Lord in Matthew's Gospel wanted to hear. These insincere men wanted to be told either that they should pay the tax or not: some would have sympathised with the revolutionaries, and others with the status quo, but they did not want to hear that they should have to give their very hearts to God, to obey *Him* always. And I do not think that we are much different from them in this regard. We would like to hear from every verse of Scripture an affirmation of what we already believe: perhaps from this verse, to be told that we ought to obey the rulers that we like and that we are free to disobey the ones we do not like. There are no crystal-clear instructions for statecraft, law, economics, or relations between Church and State provided here, but the overwhelming message is that no matter who your rulers are, remember that you (and your fellow man) are made in the image of God. Live accordingly: live as if you are made in God's image. The same rule goes for times of persecution as for peacetime. As one patristic commentator writes: "give your wealth to Caesar but reserve for God the sole innocence of your conscience, where God is beheld".⁴

We are not called to revolution, but to holiness. Thus this same anonymous commentator, in the fifth century *Incomplete Work on Matthew*, advises us to "always reflect the image of God" by the avoidance of "the arrogance of pride", "the blush of anger", "the passion of avarice", "the ravishes of gluttony", "the filth of rioting", "the pretension of conceit", "the burden of heavy drinking", and "the vanity of gossip".⁵

And they say every preacher is really preaching to themselves!

This is not just a series of "thou shalt nots" for the pious and puritanical, but a reminder that to live as an image-bearer is to constantly "guard your heart" – the very temple of God – from all that would distract you from God. In the Orthodox tradition of watchfulness (not mindfulness!), this means ever "watching over...[our] thoughts" so that we do not lose control of them or let negative thoughts take over our minds and harm our souls.⁶ Whenever these nasty thoughts begin to enter into our minds, the Fathers recommend the Jesus Prayer as a means of reclaiming our mental space, the space that is reserved for God.

So let us endeavour to pray all the days of our life, "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner". Amen.

³Augustine, Sermon XL in Sermons on Selected New Testament Lessons, <https://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity23/Augustine1.html>.

⁴Anonymous, *Incomplete Work on Matthew*.

⁵Anonymous, *Incomplete Work on Matthew*.

⁶Paisios of Athos, <https://stgeorgegreenville.org/our-faith/tenpointprogram/watchfulness>.