

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

***"Put To The Test"***

Three senior gentlemen were together in their doctor's office for a memory test. The doctor said to the first, "What is three times three?" The man replied "two hundred seventy four." The doctor then turned to the second man, "It's your turn. What is three times three?" The second man answered "Tuesday!" The doctor then turned to the third man and asked the same question: "What is three times three?" The third man blurted out without hesitation "Nine!" "That's great!" said the doctor, "How did you get that?" The man answered "Simple, I just subtracted 274 from Tuesday." Wow – are you as confused as I am? Sometimes people answer questions from what would appear to be "thin air" with no rhyme or reason. This is quite reminiscent of that character from "Taxi" - Reverend Jim Ignatowski. Rev. Jim was a real child of the 60's culture – and was always ready to answer or ask the most simplest of questions with a hilarious adventure and an "Okie doke!" He was struggling to take the written test for his driver's license and asked his friends for help on the question "what does a yellow light mean?" They tried to tell him very quietly and inconspicuously that it means "slow down" and so he does saying "what does a yellow light mean?" This happens over and over until you can't stop laughing. A perfect example of what happens when put to the test.

A college student was taking his first philosophy exam and on the paper was a single line that simply said, "Is this a question? – Discuss." After a short time the student wrote, "If that is a question, then this is an answer." The student received an "A" on the exam. Trick questions need to be met head on when put to the test.

Speaking of trick questions – in today's Holy Gospel, Jesus was being set up by His opponents who were seeking to force Him to choose between rebellion—which would allow them to charge Him before the Romans—or siding with the Romans. They were setting a very intricate trap for Our Lord; however, Jesus' incredible wisdom is demonstrated throughout the entire 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel, handling questions to keep His opponents at bay. This remarkable event is also told in Luke 20:20-26 and Mark 12:13-17.

In today's Gospel account, Jesus is confronted by two groups: the Pharisees and the Herodians. Pharisees tended to be nationalistic – meaning they were all about the Temple and the kingdom of the Jews, whereas Herodians were supporters of Herod, the Hebrew king who was put in power by the Romans. They worked together only when it suited them best – to get something! Pharisees would be concerned about Jewish legal requirements, and to have witnesses ready to make a charge against Jesus. They would be ready to investigate any and all charges concerning Jesus' disloyalty to the Law. Testing Jesus' teaching here is not surprising at all.

The Herodians, who hoped for a restoration of Herod's complete rule in Judea (which Pontius Pilate currently governed), were naturally disturbed by any messianic followers or messiahs who might come forward and threaten Herod's rule or cause Rome to tighten its direct control over them. The Pharisees, on the other hand, measure the obligations of peace with Rome against the Jewish, messianic fervor that **they assume Jesus has generated**; knowing that a disastrous tax revolt twenty years earlier had shown where such enthusiasm could lead. This puts Jesus at a three pronged fork in the road that presented difficult choices. If Jesus publicly takes the view characterized by those who are later called "Zealots" (serving no king but God,)

the Herodians can have him arrested. If Jesus rejects that view, which we find out is the case; He may compromise and weaken His following of disciples. The third choice – tell the people they don't have to pay taxes – and Jesus would be put to death!

Around the time when Jesus was a young man growing up in Nazareth, one of the most famous Jewish leaders was a man called Judas, considered a good revolutionary name in the Jewish world. Judas led a revolt regarding Roman taxation and it was crushed, mercilessly, with crosses filled with dead and dying revolutionaries across the countryside. This was to serve as a warning that paying the tax was not an option. The Pharisees and Herodians question was a loaded question that held dire consequences if the answer said anything negative about the taxes.

This incident illustrates that controversy often makes strange bedfellows. The religious leaders of Israel had one goal: they wanted to get rid of Jesus of Nazareth. They would do this through any means possible, even if it meant cooperating with lifelong enemies. **The Pharisees** were the “purists” or “legalists” of the nation who opposed Rome and all attempts by Rome to intrude into the Jewish way of life. **The Herodians** actively supported the rule of Herod and favored making changes with the times as dictated by Rome. But those issues were less important to them than the pressing issue of getting rid of Jesus, so they sent a delegation to try to trick Jesus.

In first century Israel, the area near Jerusalem circulated its own copper coins, without the image of the emperor, which was totally offensive to Jewish tastes – but they were still considered Roman coins. Foreign coins, which bore the emperor's image and mention of his divine status, were also in circulation, in the area where neither gold nor silver coins were permitted to be struck. The silver denarius, probably minted in Lyon, was the required coin to pay taxes in Judea and other places in the empire, and Jewish people had to use it whether they liked it or not. If Jesus' questioners here are concerned about paying Roman taxes, they obviously should not be carrying this coin. The issue of paying tax to the Roman emperor was one of the hottest topics in the Middle East during Jesus' day.

His sly questioners began by complimenting Jesus – and they were laying it on really thick by saying: *“Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any.”* They then get to the carefully laid trap and ask Jesus: *“Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?”* The Pharisees' plan to entrap Jesus failed because the Lord was able to surpass the problem they forced on Him. In so doing, Jesus was able to give His disciples an example of how they could live as the people of God's kingdom living in a yet imperfect world which was governed by secular authorities. Jesus spoke plainly when He told them that it is **right to render to Caesar what is Caesar's**. Jesus was not a Zealot or revolutionary looking to overthrow the Roman government. But at the same time He did not put priority upon loyalty to secular government. If one rendered – which means to give or present, to the state its regulated taxes, all the more was one to render or give to God His unrestricted due—the totality of one's being and substance, your existence, was to be rendered to God and nothing less! Loyalty to Caesar must always be set in the larger context and seen in relationship to the full submission of one's self to God. The bottom line for the disciple of Jesus is to *“render to God the things that are His.”* To clearly define what belongs to God – we need only to look at Psalm 24. Ultimately the answer is clear in Psalm 24:1 *“The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.”*

Now let's get back to the trap that was laid: If Christ opposed tribute to Rome, then He could be arrested as a traitor; but if He favored tribute to Caesar, He would lose the hearts of the Jews who despised their Roman rulers. Jesus' reply shows that the true child of God has obligations both to God and to his country. While the image of Caesar was imprinted on the coin – the Image of God was imprinted on all of mankind; (as we are made in His image) – although distorted by sin, it still was there – and would become clearer through the coming sacrifice of our Lord.

It was obvious that Jesus' questioners really did not believe in Him. Their question was, "**Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?**" Their cleverly devised question appeared to have no clear-cut answer. Jesus was aware of the hypocrisy in their approach and also of the implications of His answer. And so He answered their question by demonstrating that government does have a rightful place in everyone's life and that one can be in subjection to government and God at the same time. Ironically Jesus asks them to produce the dinar, the tribute coin, and they show that they themselves are carrying the hated currency – despite the fact that Jews were not allowed to put images of people, human faces on their coins. Caesar's face was prominently stamped on the coin and surrounding him was the message "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus" or "Son of God... high priest." How could any good Jew happily carry something like that around?

I do believe that there are three things that we need to take from this message today:

1 – While we look ahead to being citizens of God's Kingdom – we live here on this imperfect earth – and we must abide by the rules. That does not mean that we have to agree with them – but we must abide. "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's"

2 – Everything belongs to God – and as in Genesis – we are made caretakers – to preserve and care for what He has given to mankind. How many times have you been to a Holy Eucharist service and heard "All things come of Thee, O Lord – and of Thine own have we given Thee?" or sung the doxology when the offering is brought forward – "Praise God from Whom ALL blessings flow?" Even Psalm 95 reminds us "the sea is His for He made it and His hands have molded the dry land." "Give to God the things that are God's"

3 – Whenever we are put to the test – Jesus has given us the way forward. Trusting in Him, the Holy Spirit will provide for us the words necessary for a solid defense.

- Luke 12:12 *"for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."*
- Luke 21:15 *"for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute."*
- Mark 13:11 *"do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit."*

*"The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates."* (Psalms 11:5) Testing gives us a clear opportunity to grow, with God's help. God does not preserve believers from difficult circumstances, but He tests both the righteous and the wicked. For some, God's tests become a refining fire, while for others they become an incinerator for destruction. We are not to ignore or defy the tests and challenges that come our way but instead we can use them as opportunities for us to grow – trusting in God and His care for us.

I was reading in a commentary that this coin event was solely about the perfect example of the separation of church and state. Boy did this guy miss the point! He missed the point that everything belongs to God – every last bit of it – and we need to pay the dues that are required

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of us – but we must never lose sight of the fact that in spite of who sits on the earthly throne – God sits on the heavenly throne and deserves our best – and deserves our all. Jesus' answered the question in a masterful way. When He was put to the test – His answer caused His detractors to simply walk away in awe – because His answer was solid, was true, and He pointed to the fact that we are to live in this world, but we are not of it. Our King is Almighty God and to Him do we owe all honor, glory and praise. Amen!

