

“Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor” we heard in today’s gospel. We may recall this phrase differently: “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s” Whichever way we say it this phrase is part of Jesus’ response to a joint attempt by the Herodians and Pharisees to make Jesus stumble in front of His own people.

Here is the context of today’s gospel. Jesus had just returned to Jerusalem for the final time and recently finished sharing several parables with the crowd. Jesus’ enemies saw an opportunity to put Jesus on the spot in front of His followers. In verse 17, they say to Jesus, “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”. It was a trick question, and they knew it. If Jesus answered, “No,” the Herodians would charge Him with treason against Rome. If He said, “Yes,” the Pharisees would accuse Him of disloyalty to the Jewish nation, and He would lose the support of the crowds. To pay taxes or not to pay taxes? The question was designed as a trap.

Jesus’ response is nothing short of brilliant: “But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius”.

The denarius was a coin used as the tax money at the time. It was made of silver and featured an image of the emperor with an inscription calling him “divine.” Jewish people considered such images idolatry, forbidden by the first commandment. This was another reason why, if Jesus answered, “Yes,” He would be in trouble. His acceptance of the tax as “lawful” could have been seen as a rejection of the first commandment, thus casting doubt on His claim to be the Son of God.

With the coin displayed in front of them, Jesus said, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” The Herodians and Pharisees, stating the obvious, said, “Caesar’s.” Then Jesus brought an end to their foolish tricks: “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. Upon hearing this, Jesus’ enemies marvelled and went away.

When Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” He was drawing a sharp distinction between two kingdoms. There is a kingdom of this world, and the emperor holds power over it. But there is another kingdom, not of this world, and

Jesus is King of that. Christians are part of both kingdoms, at least temporarily. Under the civil authorities, we have certain obligations that involve material things. Under Christ, we have other obligations that involve things eternal. If civil authorities demands money, give it to them, but make sure you also give God what He demands.

Caesar minted coins, as he had a right to do, and he demanded some coins in return, as was his right. After all, his image was stamped on what he had made. God has “minted” the human soul, and He has stamped His image on every one. So give Caesar his due—the temporary stuff of this world—but make sure to give God His due: “Offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness”.

There is a wonderful story about an American pastor, Rev. Dr. Frank Wakely Gunsaulus, which speaks to today’s gospel:

"On a Saturday morning, while he was in his study writing a sermon, his nephew came in. The young man was a fine athlete - about 25 years of age - but, he had never been quite able to find himself. The young man said, "Uncle, I wish I knew why I was born?" It gave the preacher a chance to say a few words to him about life; and, soon the young man went on his way.

While the young man was walking down the street in Chicago, Illinois, on December 30, 1903, he heard fire engines and noticed that the Iroquois Theater on Randolph Street was burning. The young man rushed over and when he arrived, he saw a number of people gathered around a balcony window.

Quickly, the young man found a heavy plank, climbed on the building next to the theater and laid the plank across to that window. Then he stood in the window and helped many people across to safety. While he was assisting them, a heavy timber fell on him and knocked him to the pavement below. Just before he died, his uncle got to him and said, "Now you know why you were born. You were born to save those people!"

The young man gave to God what had been given to him - his life.

So we need to ask ourselves on a daily basis how we will give our lives to the Lord by asking the following questions:

- What are we going to do to be a better Christian?
- What are we going to do to make our homes happier?
- What are we going to do to make our church better?
- What we are going to do to help our community?

How we answer these questions will determine how we have answered the response given by Jesus to the question posed to him in today's gospel.

Lord, give us the grace and strength to always choose your ways. Amen.