



CATHOLIC CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCRIPTURES

Archdiocese of Miami - Ministry of Christian Formation

October 19, 2014

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gospel reading Matthew 22:15-21 *[To be read aloud]*

The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion, for you do not regard a person’s status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” Knowing their malice, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” At that he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Brief commentary:

The readings today address the oft-asked question of how people of faith, who are loyal to God, ought to relate to human authorities. The text of Isaiah, written toward the end of the Babylonian Exile (586-539BC), when Jews were freed from Babylonian captivity by the mighty Persian leader Cyrus, goes so far as to assert that Cyrus – a foreigner – is anointed by God for the purpose of doing God’s will on behalf of the exiled. At its heart is not only the idea that God is the supreme authority and that legitimate human leaders receive their authority from the sole Author, but that foreigners – and not only Israelites – can be inspired and guided by God. For these Israelites, God was able to use the nations to wield justice upon his people when they erred and use the nations to bring blessing again. No king or empire had the last word; but God alone was the true ruler and lord of ‘all the world’. For them this belief was a source of great hope in times of woe: their captors were not omnipotent, nor could they oppress them forever: their fortune was truly in the hands of the one true merciful and trustworthy God, who had made an enduring covenant of fidelity toward them. In today’s well-known gospel reading, we find Jesus again with challengers to his mission and message. This time they are accompanied by Herodians – those associated with the party of Herod Antipas, son of the late powerful ruler Herod the Great. Antipas was appointed ruler of the Galilee by the Romans, and the gospels point out – with what can be considered a historical accuracy – that he was attentive to any one who galvanized crowds with messianic-like ideas. Students of the Pharisees and the Herodians, using fine rhetoric, put Jesus’ ideas about the state to the test. Rome’s heavy taxation was highly unpopular among the country folk: and had Jesus opted to defend it, his followers would have doubted the authenticity of his concern for the common person and the poor. Had he opted to deny the lawfulness of the imposed taxation system, he would have been immediately held suspect of political subversion and perhaps arrested. Instead, Jesus at once exposed their duplicity and offered what has become a dictum in Christianity: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Today the same question is posed to Christians: Who are you to be most loyal to? Christian reflection and practice on this throughout the centuries has used this teaching and other texts, such as from the Pastorals, to assert that we are to be the best model citizens in the countries in which we live, love our countries, participate and contribute to them. At the same time, this same text and other biblical texts remind us that we “must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), point out that Christians are to be foremost loyal to God whenever leaders abuse their authority, enact unjust laws, oppress the people, and call for immoral or even criminal conduct from their citizens (such as acts of prejudice, discrimination, or attacks on fellow citizens): in essence, when human law contradicts divine law. Jesus’ opponents try to impose a narrow ‘this or that’ choice, implying that God and legitimate government were in contradiction. Jesus’ answer is a ‘both/and’: we are responsible toward *both* God *and* legitimate human authorities and just laws.

Today’s reading offers significant messages:

- Our lives are under the rule of the one true loving God. Therefore, no human authority, state or government can make ultimate claims on our lives. God uses the things of this earth to bring about his loving and wise plan.
- Jesus, his mission and message, were put to the test on numerous occasions. Like a great debater, Jesus was able to reveal a great truth while exposing the misguided intentions and flaws in his opponents’ arguments.
- Christians are to be model citizens, who contribute to the common good of our societies, but we are able to do this precisely because we are loyal to the true God above all things. And non-violent civil disobedience is itself a service of love to one’s country, wishing to correct its flaws and making it more just.

For our shared or personal reflection:

After a brief pause for silent reflection share your answers, ideas or feelings.

- Do I recognize when God is lovingly acting in my life and world through the people and events of life?
- Do I learn from others and do I correct others lovingly when I need to?
- How do I contribute to the common good of my community and society? When is civil disobedience necessary?

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 1905-17