

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Phil 2:15d, 16a

R¹. Alleluia, alleluia.

Shine like lights in the world
as you hold on to the word of life.

R². Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Matt 22:15-21; L145A

**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.”**



Reflecting on the Gospel

There are many deep divisions between “Caesar” and God, between earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of heaven. In this gospel the Pharisees’ disciples and the Herodians raise what amounts to a minor division when they raise the question of paying “the census tax to Caesar.” Seeing through their ruse, Jesus turns the tables and entraps them “with the truth.” The “way of God” is not found in opposing civil and religious realms, but in acting as Jesus would in both areas of life, responding appropriately in each “kingdom.” Like Jesus, we

are to give ourselves for the good of others in all areas of life. Giving ourselves first to God, we will know the “way” and the “truth” of all other loyalties, and our choices and behaviors will further God’s plan of salvation.

Jesus quickly dispatches this false divide between realms in which we live, commanding his hearers to give to each realm what properly belongs to it. This is actually the easy part of life. The deepest divide to which we must attend is between disingenuous hearts living a lie and transparent hearts living “in accordance with the truth.” This deepest divide is what Jesus came to heal—for those who wish to be healed. It would seem that the religious leaders—who ought to be the very ones who model for the people how undivided hearts live and act—are the very ones who do not choose to be healed. They seem to do everything to foster division. They pretend to be turned toward God through their strict religious observances, but in effect are turned toward themselves.

They pretend to be deeply religious, but in effect are shallowly self-promoting.

By trying to entrap Jesus these corrupt religious leaders are actually putting “Caesar” (that is, their own will and agenda, their own fears and obstinacy) ahead of God. Their own actions have betrayed that they themselves do anything but “teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.” Their own lifestyle and way of relating to others betray who and what is first in their life.

The obligations to Caesar and God are radically different: to the state we pay taxes, but to God we give undivided hearts. Isaiah speaks for God: “I am the LORD, there is no other” (first reading); our ultimate loyalty and self-offering is to God and so we “give to the LORD the glory due his name!” (responsorial psalm). If we keep God central in our lives, then there is no problem with giving “to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.” Further, if we place this in the eschatological (end times and fulfillment) context of Matthew’s gospel, the controversy with which the religious leaders confront Jesus simply crumbles, for everything in this world ultimately belongs to God; there is nothing of this world that compares to who God is and how much God cares for us, and nothing of this world is worth more than what God offers us. The only thing God asks of us is the self-offering that acknowledges who God is and who we are in relation to God. In return, God gives what no emperor or state can give: a share in divine Life.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Often our struggle with living this gospel is not really about two “kingdoms” presenting opposing values, but rather that our own divided hearts trump everything else. The kind of self-giving that gives to God what is God’s due and to society what is society’s due necessitates that we think of others first. It truly is that simple, yet sometimes so hard to live!

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: entrap Jesus, in accordance with the truth, malice, hypocrites, what belongs to Caesar, what belongs to God

To the point: There are many deep divisions between “Caesar” and God. But the Pharisees’ disciples and the Herodians raise what amounts to a minor division. Jesus quickly dispatches this divide, commanding his hearers to give to each realm what properly belongs to it. The deepest divide is between disingenuous hearts living a lie and transparent hearts living “in accordance with the truth.” This deepest divide is what Jesus came to heal—for those who wish to be healed.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: God can (and does) use civil authority for divine purposes of salvation (see first reading). There is no inherent divide between these realms of authority. However, often we human beings separate the realm of God from that of humanity through our own malice, deceit, and self-serving interests.

to experience: Sometimes the two “kingdoms” in which we live are in conflict—our religious values clash with civil polity. As faithful followers of Jesus, we must always choose first God’s kingdom.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: The connection between the verses of Psalm 96 and this Sunday’s first reading and gospel is readily evident. God alone is God; even when unrecognized, God alone is the source of all power and authority (first reading). The psalm calls us to give God “glory and praise” and to announce God’s sovereignty to all nations. Jesus repeats this command in his admonition to the Pharisees: give God proper due (gospel).

But a subtle irony in the readings lends even greater weight to this command of Jesus. While Cyrus, a non-Jew, unknowingly unfolds God’s plan, the Pharisees, acknowledged religious leaders among the Jews, knowingly work to subvert it. One who does not know God furthers God’s redemptive plan while those reputed to be God’s servants thwart it. The message for us is that to give God proper due it is not sufficient merely to mouth praise or to engage in public religious activity. Rather, we must give what Cyrus is unaware of and the Pharisees refuse: our hearts in conscious cooperation with God’s will.

to psalmist preparation: The greatest “glory and honor” we can give God is an obedient heart. This is what you call the assembly to in singing Psalm 96. Is there anything which stands in the way of you giving God your heart?

ASSEMBLY & FAITH-SHARING GROUPS

- The divisions I experience in daily living are . . . I respond to these divisions by . . .
- I know I am living “in accordance with the truth” when . . . The truth of my life is . . .
- What and who help me give to God what belongs to God are . . .

PRESIDERS

My ministry helps parishioners better know and live the “way of God” when . . .

DEACONS

My serving others brings together the kingdoms of the world and church in these ways . . .

HOSPITALITY MINISTERS

My hospitality affirms and supports the assembly’s giving to God what belongs to God in these ways . . .

MUSIC MINISTERS

My music ministry is more immersed in the “kingdom” of the world when . . . It is more immersed in God’s kingdom when . . .

ALTAR MINISTERS

My serving at the altar advances God’s kingdom when I . . .

LECTORS

Like King Cyrus in the first reading, God calls me to lead people home when I . . .

EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

The self-offering that the liturgy calls forth from me is what I repay to God when I . . .