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Everything belongs to God, even Caesar's coins

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 20, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

These words of Jesus at the end of today's Gospel are perhaps among the most misunderstood words of Jesus in all the Scriptures, in all the Gospels because many, many people, and perhaps some of us, interpret these words as Jesus declaring there are two totally separate realms. There is Caesar's, the political, human realm, and then there is God's. There are two separate forms of our existence, what we might call in current terms the religious and the political, and they should never be brought together. They are totally separate.
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I'm sure many of you have heard how we're supposed to keep religion out of politics, and sometimes I've heard people criticize a homily because "Father got political today." So there is a separation, but what Jesus is teaching us today is not that there is a separation. That would be totally foreign to the idea of the chosen people, the Jewish people. For them, everything belonged to God, and when Jesus was responding to those Pharisees and Herodians, He was reminding them that that coin in the pocket of one of them belonged to God. The person himself belongs to God.

The 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

Thessalonians 1:1-5b

Matthew 22:15-21

Full text of the readings.[1]

All of the world, the universe, everything is God's, and we can't separate our lives into a secular sphere and a religious sphere. It has to be all one. Perhaps it helps if we understand a little bit better what was happening in the confrontation. As Matthew said, they were trying to trap Jesus because the chosen people had been occupied now by the Roman army and they had lost their freedom, and so the Romans, represented by Caesar, had imposed taxes on them. Many of the Jews would refuse absolutely to pay those taxes because they would not cooperate with the Roman authorities.

The Herodians were those who would cooperate. So in this instance, they come together to trap Jesus, because if He says, "Pay the taxes," then the religious people who refused to accept the domination of Rome will reject Jesus. If He says, "Don't pay the taxes," then He's in big trouble with the authorities. So Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's but give to God what is God's." In this case, all He means is look at that coin. Whose picture is on it? It's Caesar's picture. In the Jewish situation, all the coins belonged to Caesar. The people who had them were only using what belonged to Caesar until Caesar said to give them back in taxes.

Well, that's what you must do. But then don't forget, there is God's realm everywhere, and you must give to God all of your life, every aspect of it, because God is at work throughout all of creation in the life of everyone, in every nation and every place. This is very clear how God is at work everywhere when we go back to our first lesson today. It really is quite extraordinary. As I mentioned before, the chosen people are in exile. They see no way out. Isaiah comes along and he proclaims, "Look, here's what God says to His anointed. To Cyrus, He calls you the anointed."

Do you know what that word is? That means The Christ, just like Jesus is called The Christ, God's anointed. This pagan, who never knows God down below, Isaiah, speaking for God says, "Although you do not know Me, for the sake of Jacob, My servant of Israel, My chosen one, I have called you, Cyrus, the pagan who doesn't

even know God," and God is going to act through Cyrus because God acts everywhere in all of the universe. He can act through a pagan leader just as He can act through Jesus, God's own son.

There's a kind of modern example that I think is very powerful for us to reflect on. Back in 1976 for the World Day of Peace, Jan. 1, 1976, Pope Paul VI wrote what we call the Peace Day Message. In that message, he reflects at one point on the incredible evil of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and he calls that a butchery of untold magnitude, this total destruction of two whole cities and all of their people. Then he says, "Who is the model for our time?" In the midst of this kind of violence, this kind of killing that you can describe as a butchery of untold magnitude, who is the model?

Do you know who Paul names? Gandhi, a Hindu, not a Christian. There is the model for our time because God is acting through Gandhi. Gandhi shows us the way that Jesus would reject violence, killing, brutality and butchery. God acts through everyone and everything. God has to be present in every aspect of our lives. So when Jesus says, "Give back to God what is God's," it means every part of our life. In our circumstances today, if we want to apply this teaching of Jesus, we can again go back this time to 1971, when Pope Paul VI called together Church leaders from around the whole world and told them, "We need to discuss the question of justice in the world."

We live in a world where there is so much injustice. So few have so much. So many have so little, and billions of people are living in destitution, and many of them in absolute poverty in a situation in a world where, according to God's ways, everyone has a right to a full, human life and to all that you need for a full, human life. That's God's justice. So these church leaders gathered and discussed, and at the end of the document that they produced, they said, "Action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world, these are in our judgment, constitutive dimensions of the preaching of the Gospel."

Action for justice, participating in the transformation of the world, entering into the world, transforming it to become the Reign of God where there would be a fullness of justice, love, peace and joy, that's constitutive of the Gospel. It means it constitutes the Gospel message of Jesus. So far from Jesus saying there is God's realm and a worldly, secular realm, God is saying it is all one. Everything belongs to God. So we must transform this world, do action for justice, participate in the world's transformation until it becomes the Reign of God.

Now, if we put this into our lives today, that means we have to look at where there is injustice in the world, and this involves political questions because so many of our policies -- the tax code for example -- can bring about a just world or an unjust world. We can make some people richer and richer and others poorer and poorer by the public policies that we follow. Of course, we're in a political season right now where people are running for president already. It's more than a year away and we're hearing all kinds of discussion about what public policy should be.

The one thing we can't do from the pulpit in trying to explain the Gospel is say, "You must vote this way or you must vote that way," but the challenge is for all of us to look at what Jesus says and try to make sure that however we vote, whatever kind of public policy we promote and support, is one that transforms this world into the Reign of God where there is justice for everybody. That's going to require effort on our part to make sure that we bring to bear on the "political" decisions that we make, the teachings of Jesus, the full message, the message that He gives to us about how to make justice happen, how to reach out to the poor, the outcasts, those who are rejected in our society.

This is what we must reflect on and try to bring about. We can do that, I think, if we really take to heart what Paul says to the church at Thessalonica. This is the first place he had preached, and these are the first Christians and the first letter that he writes. He thanks God for all of them and he says, "I remember you in my prayers. We constantly recall before God the work of your faith, the labors of your love." Paul should be able to say all of that to us, but the reason he could say it to them is because, as he says, "The Gospel we brought you, you

received not just as human words, but as the very power of God."

So if we do the same thing, accept this Gospel not as human words, but as the power of God, God's spirit speaking to us, then we let that guide us in every aspect of our lives because every part of our life is part of the realm of God. Again, we must transform our world into as close an image of that Reign of God as possible. We'll do that if we take God's word as the powerful word that it is, God's very spirit speaking to us as God spoke to those first Christians that Paul converted in Thessalonica.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich.]

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