

XXIII Trinity 2021
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
St. Matthew 22.15-22



Does Jesus say we have to pay our income taxes? Based on today's Gospel...the answer is clearly yes!

The Pharisees are always looking for ways to trap Jesus with questions they think he won't be able to answer. In today's Gospel, they send some of their own men along with some Herodians to put their latest plan into action.

We're familiar with the Pharisees...they were one of the two major sects within Judaism...the other being the Sadducees. They differed on many social and religious matters. Their major religious difference...the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead...the Sadducees did not.

The Herodians were big fans of King Herod and his political aspirations. They were Hellenized Jews who combined Jewish religious tradition with elements of Greek culture. They shared this philosophy with the Sadducees...but not with the traditionalist-minded Pharisees.

The men first try to butter Jesus up with some disingenuous flattery about what a smart guy he is...calling him "Teacher"...and how he speaks God's will for men...and always tells the truth. Thinking Jesus has now let his guard down...they ask him if it is against their Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor. They were hoping for a yes or no answer.

Taxes were paid with the Silver Denarius that bore the image of Caesar and were inscribed with the words "the king is god". This presented a problem for most Jews...whose only King was God...whom they called by the special name YAHWEH. Calling a human king a god was both blasphemous and idolatrous.

Jesus isn't fooled by the attempt to trick him. He does what he often does...he answers the no-win question about paying taxes with a question of his own. He asks them to show him the Silver Denarius and describe whose image and inscription appear on the coin. They answer the Emperor's. Jesus tells them to pay to the Emperor what belongs to him...and to pay to God what belongs to him.

The Pharisees and Herodians walked away shaking their heads. Although they didn't realize it...Jesus has given them a clear answer on paying taxes. Using the Silver Denarius with the Emperor's image and inscription to pay taxes doesn't violate God's law...and provides certain benefits they don't understand.

"In God We Trust" is the official motto of the United States. The motto first appeared on US coins in 1864 and on US paper money in 1957. The US Mint resisted the idea of minting coins with images of presidents or other historic figures. The Lincoln Cent, first minted in 1909, was the first coin to be minted with the image of a president. It is still being minted today...and has always been engraved with the motto "In God We Trust".

Here's a fascinating historical fact worth revisiting. President Theodore Roosevelt believed having God's name on coinage was disrespectful and sacrilegious. In 1907 he ordered the motto removed from newly minted \$20 gold pieces. The public was outraged...and Congress had to gently remind the President only it had the authority to change coinage. The motto was quickly restored.

We can all think of better things to do with our money than pay taxes. We pay taxes because Jesus tells us it's the right thing to do. We may not always agree with our government leaders but we believe in a God who created order out of chaos...and supporting our State and Federal governments through paying taxes helps maintain order. And we do derive benefits from paying our taxes...although they aren't always evident.

The question about paying taxes appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. It's an interesting story. Jesus doesn't tell us what heaven is going to be like or how to get there. He doesn't heal someone. He doesn't tell us to be kind to others...although we could argue that's implied in his answer...or rather his question we are supposed to answer.

Today's Gospel is about our duty to God and our duty to the State. Where the two conflict with each other...God must always win. We give to God everything due him...the rest will take care of itself.

