

XXIII Trinity 2023  
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish  
Father Craig Looney  
*St. Matthew 22.15-22*

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Jesus has just finished a short story about a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. The story is about the Kingdom of heaven. We know how the story ends...Jesus says many are invited...few are chosen.

The Pharisees who heard this story were looking for ways to trap Jesus in his own words. They conspired with members of Herod's Party to come up with some questions they hoped would trick Jesus.

Herod's Party...called the Herodians in the KJV...were a politically powerful group that supported King Herod Antipas, the Roman Empire's ruler over much of the land of the Jews from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D. They believed it was politically expedient to align themselves with Rome. This often put them at odds with the Pharisees. The Herodians and Pharisees did agree on one thing...they both hated Jesus.

The Herodians and Pharisees first came to Jesus with disingenuous flattery and praise about what a wonderful teacher he is and how he always speaks God's truth. They ask Jesus if it is against their Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not.

Taxes were paid with the Silver Denarius that bore the image of Caesar and the Inscription "the king is god". If Jesus answered "yes" to the question about paying taxes...he could be accused of blasphemy. Only YAHWEH (God) could rightfully be called their King. If Jesus answered "no"...he could be accused of inciting insurrection against the Roman government.

Jesus knows what the Herodians and Pharisees are up to. Instead of answering the question directly, he asks them to show him the coin used to pay the taxes and describe whose image and inscription appear on it. 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 Herodians and Pharisees had no come back to what Jesus said. Their plan to trap him had failed. They could only walk away shaking their heads in amazement.

"In God We Trust" is the official motto of the United States and appears on our coins and currency. That hasn't always been the case. "In God We Trust" became our official motto in 1957. The motto first appeared on US coins in 1864 and on US paper money in 1957. The Lincoln Cent, first minted in 1909, was the first coin to have the image of a president. It is still being minted today...and has always been engraved with the motto "In God We Trust".

There is no suggestion Lincoln, Washington, Kennedy or Sacagawea who guided the Lewis and Clark Expedition, are gods. We honor them and other historical figures with their images on our coins and currency...for the contributions they made to our country. The coins and currency that bare their images can become idols when they become more important than the God in whom we place our 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.

What about paying taxes? Most of us would rather take a vacation, buy a new car, or make a contribution to the Parish with the money we earn. Paying our Income Tax isn't at the top of our list of favorite things to do.

While we may not always agree with our government leaders, we do believe in a God who created order out of chaos...and supporting our State and Federal governments through paying taxes helps maintain order. We also derive certain benefits from paying taxes, although the benefits are not always apparent.

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. And do we get a clear answer from Jesus whether or not Christians are obligated to pay taxes? We do...and the answer is "yes".

Jesus would tell us to give to Uncle Sam what belongs to him, and give to God what belongs to him and him alone.

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