



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Caesar or God

Readings: Isaiah 45: 1-, 4-6, Ps 95, 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5, Matthew 22: 15-21

Today's Gospel contains one of the most familiar quotes of Jesus and its ramifications echo down the centuries. When presented with a penetrating question about the nature of authority, Christ delivers His verdict.

The context: the little state of Israel is under Roman dominion. Since the fatal civil war in the last dynasty of Israel, Pompey, the great roman general, had captured Jerusalem in 63 BC and put it under a client king. The Jews were granted special privileges like exemption from military service and the right to avoid pagan worship by paying a tax to the imperial authorities.

Under this client king the state had achieved much prosperity but the tension over independence remained. The loyalty of any claimant to authority (messiahship monarchy) was always tested against the prevailing political settlement.

So, when the usual suspects try to tease out Jesus position on this potentially incendiary matter, His answer is potentially explosive. If He acquiesces in the current settlement then clearly He is no heir of David, no advocate of the restoration of the kingdom, no candidate for Messiah. If he rejects the authority of Rome, He is tantamount to raising the flag of revolt

which, in the years to come would see the Holy City reduced to ruin and the Jews begin the longest exile in the history of Man. Upon His answer to this question, therefore, hangs the future of the self-understanding of the Christian political settlement.

The loyalty of citizens to a state is seen, in western democracies, as consistent with a contract. That contract is that we surrender our absolute autonomy to the state in exchange for a guarantee that the state will defend our right to live in peace and prosper. In other systems, like Marxist tyrannies, the citizen is merely a tool of the state for the benefit of the grasping totalitarian faction in power. In the situation of first century Israel, the Pax Romana shielded the state from incursion by other hostile powers and permitted a degree of freedom to the citizen that would be the envy of many modern victims of imperial tyrannies. There was, of course, a difference between being a citizen (a privilege) and being an inhabitant – though inhabitants enjoyed much of the fruits. In extreme circumstances the difference would be noticeable. St Peter – not a citizen – crucified. St Paul – a citizen – beheaded.

For most of us – who live in a constitutional monarchy – we are technically ‘subjects’ because citizenship is a feature of republics – a title to which Rome pretended long after submitting itself to imperial rule.

The contract, then, was a two-way street – the citizen had obligations to the state. The state had duties to the citizen.

We have, during my lifetime, become complacent of our very real freedoms and the contract upon which they depend. Because we have, rightly,

assumed that we are insulated from tyranny by the wrap – around of Judeo-Christian understanding, we have become unguarded as those very bulwarks and pillars of our freedom and safety have been systematically dismantled by the self-same state in response to the special pleadings of hostile lobby groups. We now, too often, find ourselves at odds, not just with the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, but with the very laws that govern us. So, for us, the question of compliance and collaboration with the state begins to loom large. Therefore, the answer that Jesus gives to the question in today's gospel, suddenly looms disconcertingly large.

The early Christian community had enough problems with misunderstandings and brutal persecutions without being labelled as 'antinomian', lawless rebels, face set against the pagan state. Thus the norm was to recognise the state and conform to its laws except where this led to direct contravention of divine law.

When Jesus is challenged on the question of compliance – the symbol of which is opting in by paying taxes – His response is both cute and telling. The coin, symbol of imperial contract with its citizens, is produced and the conclusion offered – Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.

The deliberate ambiguity rests on the fact that the Empire entertained the absurdity that the Caesars were, sooner or later in most cases, elevated to the pantheon of the pagan deities – they became 'gods'.

To Jesus' hearers there was, of course, only one God and He took absolute and eternal priority over the temporary affairs of men.

The Christian politic therefore has ever been acceptance of the State where possible and a membership of it, paying our dues and serving where possible. What it cannot do is to become a collaborator with wickedness as in the case of the abrogation of the rights of the unborn- as in the surrender of leading Catholic politicians in the USA from the President down to the materialist agenda, or in secret deals with persecutory godless states giving them control over the appointments of priests and bishops in a sort of Vichy Church – as in the concord with Marxist China.

In our own land we face the same dilemmas and, increasingly, in the area of what can be taught to our children in the touchstone area of human sexuality and identity. Having enjoyed the comfort of a Christian ethos for long years, we are now having to rapidly assess what we can render unto Caesar and what we cannot countenance because it belongs to the sovereignty of God.