

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.

Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector. October 22, 2023

Scripture readings: Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; **Matthew 22:15-22**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

In today's Gospel we are going to see one of Jesus' innovative proposals that has taken a long time to be understood and applied throughout the centuries: the separation of politics and religion. Until then, most towns mixed the two things. The Hebrews were accustomed to conceiving the future reign of God, established by the Messiah, as a theocracy.

Let's see what a theocracy is: it is a form of government in which the ultimate leader is a supreme deity who rules either directly as a god in human form or indirectly through earthly people, such as the clergy. The government serves the leader's ideas instead of its people. And whatever the government does is seen as God's will.

Fortunately, it doesn't happen anymore, does it?

There are some countries that consider themselves theocracies such as Vatican City, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Others also place North Korea in that category as a kind of personality cult.

Let's see what occasion is presented to Jesus in the Gospel. Two groups - the Pharisees, a religious party, and Herodians, a political party - are fighting each other, but both are united against Jesus. The Pharisees were nationalists, secretly hostile to Roman power; The Herodians, on the contrary, were collaborationists and supported the Roman power. Together, they planned an excellent strategy to destroy Jesus.

Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. What a false admiration! They complimented Jesus's intelligence and wisdom, thinking that Jesus would not respond. They wanted him to look ridiculous. Then, they asked him:

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it legal to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" It's a difficult question to answer. Responding this question would be self-destructing because it would put him either against Rome, or the nation of Israel.

If Jesus answered: "Yes, it is lawful to pay the tribute" he would align himself with the foreign occupiers and would experience the rejection of all his people who suffered the burden of high taxes. If he answered: "No, it is not lawful to pay the tribute," the Herodians could accuse him before the Roman procurator of inciting rebellion and going against the emperor, for which he would be tried and persecuted.

But Jesus is aware of the intended deception and confronts them. Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

They expected a yes or no answer, but he answered both. He changed their binomial world of yes or no. For Jesus, there are countless possibilities where God is always first.

Jesus asks them for one of the coins used to pay taxes. The common denarius was a coin issued by Tiberius, the Roman emperor, during Jesus' ministry. It has the head of Tiberius on the obverse or the head of the coin. The Latin inscription surrounding Tiberius' head is an abbreviation of TIBERIUS CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTI FILIUS AUGUSTUS, which means 'Tiberius Caesar, the son of the divine Augustus, the Augustus.



TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS.

TIBERIUS CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTI FILIUS AUGUSTUS, which means 'Tiberius Caesar, the son of the divine Augustus, the Augustus.

Augustus, the Augustus.



PONTIFEX MAXIMVS

PONTIFEX MAXIMUS, the greatest bridge to the gods.

As you can notice, the emperor was regarded as divine provenance. The Roman state religion was an imperial cult. Emperors and members of their families were considered gods.

On the coin's reverse is a seated woman holding a scepter and a branch. It is assumed that she is Livia, the wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius. The reverse inscription is an abbreviation of PONTIFEX MAXIMUS, the greatest bridge to the gods.

When Jesus asks what is seen on the obverse side, the answer is the head of Tiberius.

When he replied: Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.", Jesus is removing the divine character from the Roman government and manifesting that the Reign of God goes beyond human powers who act in the name of God. At no point is he opposing political power, but he clarifies that his reign goes beyond those aspirations or theocracies. Nothing and no one else can replace God: no government and no charismatic and populist leaders.

Tiberius wanted to rule the world with oppression, a solid military apparatus, and be seen and feared as a god. Jesus, being God, wanted to rule the hearts with freedom, without any army, using love as pedagogy and intelligence to open the minds of those who listened to him. Love meets all justice. That love has gone on for centuries in many places. It has reached out to us, and it is here among us. For that reason, we wake up on Sundays to come to church, even when it is dark and cold,

or to join the service on Zoom. That love motivates us to help others when we do not expect to receive anything in return. That love invites us to care about and find solutions to social misery.

The greatest tribute given to God is love. That is what Jesus tells us. We are free in his love and then, we offer our gifts: time, talent, and treasure to a common goal: to keep alive God's dream, which at the same time, is an abundant life for all of us.