

29th Sunday OT - (Year A) – October 22, 2017

IS 45:1, 4-6; PS 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10; 1 THES 1:1-5B; MT 22:15-2

The dominant focus for my priesthood, by far, these past eight days has been *marriage*.

My **nephew** was married last Saturday in **Seattle**. I met with two couples here at the parish earlier this week who started the **spiritual formation process** for marriage. Yesterday, I helped **team teach a workshop** at the Diocesan Pastoral Center for about 30 couples called “**God’s Plan for a Joy Filled Marriage**”—and among that group were **three couples from this parish!** This coming week, I’m scheduled to meet with two more couples here at the parish to discuss Sacramental Marriage in the Church.

So, why bring up **marriage** when it has nothing to do with today’s Gospel debate about a religious believer’s **duty to pay taxes** to the state? Well, as it turns out, while the **subject matter** certainly differs, there is a common denominator which will become **clearer** as we look **closer**.

Let’s start with the Gospel passage we just heard.

The alliance between Pharisees and Herodians was an unlikely one because the **Pharisees** wanted nothing to do with **non-Jews** and the **Herodians** were supporters of **pagan** Rome. These two factions were definitely not friendly with each other, but it was their **mutual contempt for Jesus** that brought them together.

A modern version of such an improbable partnership is when **dissenting Catholics**—those who don’t like particular teachings of the Church—team up with segments of the secular culture like **progressive politicians** and the **media**—to oppose and disparage the *teachings of Jesus* which are **safeguarded** and **handed on** by the Catholic Church.

This phenomenon is, perhaps, easiest to see *these days* when it comes to the question of **marriage**. And although an argument between Jesus and his opponents over *paying taxes* differ—in *kind*—from arguments between faithful Catholics and their opponents on the Church’s teaching on *marriage*, the **underlying dynamic of deliberate manipulation** is common to both controversies.

We live in a secular culture that has **re-defined marriage** to mean **so many contradictory things** that the **word** itself is becoming as *meaningless*...as its **manifestations** are becoming *absurd*. And just as Jesus’ opponents framed a question about *paying taxes* as a way to **entrap** him, so too do those today who oppose

marriage as a gift given to humanity by God pose a **particular question** designed to *pigeonhole* the respondent.

The question is this one:

“Do you believe in ‘gay marriage’?”

When faced with such a **loaded question**, the only **sane** way to respond is to **zero in** on the *real* issue. So, for example, when a faithful Catholic is asked the question, **“Do you believe in “gay marriage”?”** the key is to do what Jesus did to his interrogators. Respond with a question of our own...and it's *this one*:

What is marriage?

In the Gospel, the unscrupulous questioners were trying to bait Jesus. If he said taxes *should* be paid to Caesar, the Pharisees would discredit him for putting **secular laws** above **God's laws**. If he said that taxes **should not** be paid, then he could be accused of **subverting the state**.

In a similar way, when a Catholic is asked **“Do you believe in “gay marriage”?”** he or she will be labeled a **bigot** if they say **“no”** ...or a **dissenting Catholic** if they say **“yes”**. It's a no-win situation precisely because *the question itself* is based on a **false understanding of marriage**.

So...the **distortion** must first be exposed before an **accurate answer** can be given!!

Jesus took just such an approach in today's Gospel because he forced his opponents to focus on the most important distinction:

What belongs to the **world**...and what belongs to *God*.

Not surprisingly, the **same distinction** must be made about *marriage*.

By re-framing the question to focus on **what marriage is**, we can at least **begin** to have a genuine dialogue about **where** marriage came from, **who** created marriage, **who** sets the boundaries and definition of marriage, and, ultimately, **what** a human person is. By steering the conversation back to the *real* issue, we avoid getting ensnared in **emotionalism that disfigures marriage**...and get focused on what *matters*.

As **Bishop Olmsted** said, back in 2010:

“...the reason why the state cannot redefine marriage is because it never defined it in the first place; it is a truth received, not created. It is God who defined marriage.”

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/bishop-olmsted-says-prop.-8-decision-puts-cultures-sanity-at-risk>

Since we already now know the hypocritical **motivations** of Jesus’ interrogators in today’s Gospel passage, let’s dive deeper into Jesus’ **response**, because it teaches us how to navigate our own insane society which constantly seeks to sideline the **true Gospel** in favor a **perverted secular dogma**, *especially* when it comes to **marriage**. Let’s revisit the Gospel at **the point after which** Jesus had been asked the “trap” question about taxes.

Knowing their malice, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” At that he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” (Mt 22:18-21)

And here we discover *the key points of focus* for our purposes:

Image and inscription...and what belongs to God.

Noticing **what Jesus identified as most central** to the conversation can help us neutralize attempts by *our contemporaries* to manipulate discussions about **marriage**.

Let’s start with **“image and inscription”**.

Jesus asked whose image and inscription was on the Roman coin because the answer to that question revealed **who the coin belonged to**. Caesar’s image and inscription had been stamped into the coin. **The coin was Caesar’s**.

But here’s the amazing thing. The *human person* also bears an **image** and **inscription!**

But *whose?*

Let’s travel back to the beginning—to the **Book of Genesis**—where we read:

*...God said, "Let us make man in our **image**, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own **image**, in the **image** of God he created him; male and female he created them.* (Gen 1:26-27)

What about *inscription*?

Here we fast forward from **Genesis** to **Jeremiah**, where God told the **prophet**:

*...this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will **write it upon their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* (Jer 31:33)

So, God created human beings—male and female—*in his image*...and *inscribed* his law of love in our hearts. But we are not his **coins**. We are his *sons* and *daughters*!

But this all unraveled early on, when **Satan** convinced our **first parents**—*Adam and Eve*—that they had to **steal from God** what God had *already given them*...in order to **be like God**. That was the key to the Devil's victory! To cause Adam and Eve to forget their origins—the fact that they were *already like God*—made in his image with his law written in their hearts—and to **mistrust** their **Father** to the point of *rebellion*.

And what was true *then* is true **now**.

As soon as we put ourselves in place of God, we not only distort *his identity*. We also obscure *our own*. Taken to its extreme, we will even begin to **re-create ourselves** into whatever our fickle emotions tell us, at any particular moment in time, who and what we are. This *self-imposed fluctuating sense of self* is exposed when the phrase, "**I identify as...**" replaces the simple and true words, "**I am**".

A changeable identity is as unstable as a house built on sand (cf. Mt 7:26).

If **who** and **what** we are really is as **changeable as our outfits**, we will not only be lost to **God**. We will be lost to *ourselves*. And this will manifest in *self-hatred, self-destruction, despair* and *suicide*.

A priest who spends hours in the Confessional sees that these **destructive attitudes** are *increasing rapidly, especially among our young people*.

When we **reject** God, we begin to *play* God. And considering how inept we are at managing **our own lives**—how incapable we are of maintaining **peace** and **harmony** even *within ourselves*—how well do we really think we'll do in *God's* role?

Well, we don't have to speculate. We can just **watch the news for five minutes** to see the state of our society, and we'll get our answer.

So, we've looked at **image** and **inscription** as it applies to the human person. But Jesus also said:

...repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. (Mt 22:21)

When we allow the **image of God that we bear**, and the **inscription of his law in our hearts** to become **distorted** or **unrecognizable**, we will no longer know **what** and **who** belongs to the *world* and **what** and **who** belongs to *God*, and we will *inevitably* begin to give to **this world** what belongs to *God*...starting with *ourselves*.

It should come as no surprise, then, that most of the dissent against the Catholic Church these days centers around her teachings on **sexuality**. This is no accident, precisely because our sexuality speaks deeply of **who** we are...and *whose* we are.

Do you think it's a mere coincidence that the **natural generation** of a third person—a *child*—which flows from the *natural physical act of love between a man and woman* given to each other by God in Sacramental Marriage, **mirrors** the fact that the Holy Spirit is—**Himself**—the personification of the love between God the Father and God the Son?

Do you think it's an accident that marriage is *the icon*, placed at the center of human society, that most closely reveals the **very identify of God** in the **Most Holy Trinity**?

And does it surprise you that the **Devil's** most consistent **point of attack** on humanity is the **family**?

Sr. Lucia, the oldest of the three children to whom **Our Lady of Fatima** appeared 100 years ago wrote these words...*many years after* the Apparitions at Fatima:

“...the final battle between the Lord and the reign of Satan will be about marriage and the family. Don't be afraid, she added, because anyone who

operates for the sanctity of marriage and the family will always be contended and opposed in every way, because this is the decisive issue.”

<https://onepeterfive.com/sister-lucia-final-confrontation-between-the-lord-and-satan-will-be-over-family-and-marriage/>

We repay to God what belongs to him, *not* through **rebellion** and **disobedience**, but, rather, by **abandonment** of our **lives** and our **futures** into his hands with **trust** and **obedience**.

G.K. Chesterton, the great English Catholic writer, famously stated:

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

We’ve already tried the path of **rebellion** and **disobedience**, and all we have to do is look around at our world today to see where *that* has gotten us.

The worldly “**gospel**” has not only been found *wanting*.

It has unleashed **hell on earth**.

Since we **ourselves**, belong to God, it’s high time we repaid to him what belongs to him through our **faith**...our **hope**...our **love**...and our *obedience* to him.

And when we do, we will discover anew that the One **whose image we bear** and **whose law is inscribed in our hearts** is not an **emperor**...but a **Father**...*Our* Father.

And that we are more **valuable**...and more *dear*...to him...than all the coins in the world.