

11.3.2024 Trinity 23 (Philippians 3:17-21; Matthew 22:15-22)

In the Epistle reading this morning, in this passage we read from a letter written to Christians, St. Paul declared, “*our citizenship is in heaven*” (Philippians 3:20). You and I, Christians, are citizens of heaven, and this eternal truth about the country to which our allegiance ultimately belongs, is exactly what we need to hear this morning. Our next presidential election is just two days away, and although these elections are held only once every four years, doesn’t it seem as if campaigning for that office never ends? In support of that thought, I learned that in recent presidential races, non-incumbent nominees have officially launched their presidential campaigns an average of 531 days before the election took place.

*Our citizenship is in heaven*, but the never-ending presidential campaign can obscure that truth and lure us into placing the politics of this world above our devotion to the next. On a daily basis, politicians do all they can to capture the attention of the American people. They want us to be drawn into their campaign, and many politicians would have us believe that our hope and our future are found, not in God, but in the next person to lead our country. Therefore, we must always be mindful of the fact that we are first and foremost citizens of heaven, that we give up ourselves to love and serve and worship the King whose reign will never end, and, that ten thousand millennia after the last presidential election is over, our Lord and Savior, the King of Heaven, will still be on the throne.

*Our citizenship is in heaven*. On the day of our baptism we renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil and became citizens of another country. You and I, who were born children of Adam, were made sons and daughters of God, and citizens of heaven, through Holy Baptism. In a letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul wrote about how we have been reconciled to God, and “*are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...*” (Ephesians 2:18-19). You see, it’s not that we will one day be citizens of heaven, but that we are now. It’s actually here in this fallen world that we are strangers and pilgrims, exiles and aliens in a foreign land, because our citizenship ultimately belongs to another country, our allegiance to another king, and this truth is not only presented to us in the Epistle, but in today’s Gospel text as well.

In that passage, we read about how the disciples of the Pharisees made an alliance with the Herodians and “*went out and laid plans to trap Him (Jesus) in His words*” (Matthew 22:15 NIV). Their goal was to lure our Lord into saying something that would either discredit Him or lead to His arrest, and to that end these men approached Him with the impossible question, “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*” (Matthew 22:17). This was a question for which there was no escape, because if Jesus answered by simply saying, “Yes, humble yourselves under this burden and pay the exorbitant taxes imposed on you by your Roman oppressors...” then He would certainly be discredited - viewed by the people as a traitor. On the other hand, if He said, “No, resist Rome, refuse to pay these taxes...” then He’d be seen by the Roman authorities as someone who’s leading the people to rebel against them. A crime that would get Him thrown into prison - or worse.

At this point, St. Matthew tells us that “*Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the tax”* (Matthew 22:18-19). Instead of being caught in their trap, Jesus did the unexpected. He didn’t simply answer yes or no, but instead told them to show Him the coin, and holding it up He asked them the question, “*Whose image and inscription is this?*” (Matthew 22:20). In other words, who issues this currency, from whom does it proceed? When they told Him that the coin was issued by Caesar, He said to them, “*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (Matthew 22:21).

This plan to trap Jesus in His words was a miserable failure, because He used this moment to teach those who were present that day, and every generation since then, an important lesson about what we the people owe to the governments of this world, and what we, as people, owe God. The first part of His answer, *Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*, is the source of what St. Paul wrote in a letter to the Romans, in which he stated, “*Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes*” (Romans 13:7 NIV). Jesus’ answer is also the basis of what St. Peter wrote in his first epistle, when He stated, “*For the Lord’s sake, submit to all human authority - whether the king as the head of state, or the officials he has appointed*” (1

Peter 2:13-14 NLT).

Citizens of heaven, members of the household of God, give to everyone what we owe them. We pay our taxes. We vote. We pray for our country and its leaders, whether we agree with them or not, because we know that God created government, and that ultimately government exists to serve Him. Citizens of heaven obey the laws instituted on this earth, and we submit to all human authority, because, again in the words of St. Paul, “*there is no authority except from God, and those (authorities) that exist have been instituted by God*” (Romans 13:1).

So, the first part of Jesus’ answer, *Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*, clearly expresses our Lord’s command that Christians are to give to government what belongs to government, and the second part of His reply, *Render to God the things that are God’s*, communicates the truth that there are limits to what we owe government. When Jesus held up that coin, it was obvious to everyone that the coin belonged to Caesar because it bore his image, and what is meant to be just as obvious to us is the fact that we belong to God, because we bear His image. We were made by Him, in His *image* and *likeness* (Genesis 1:26-27), and so it follows that we are meant to be given entirely to Him.

In just a few minutes, as we prepare to receive our Lord in Holy Communion, we will pray these familiar words that express that truth perfectly: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...” We approach the Lord’s Table with hearts ready to receive, and hearts ready to render. Hearts ready to receive the gift of God’s only Son, and hearts ready to render *to God the things that are God’s*: our selves, our souls and bodies.

We give to Caesar what is Caesar’s by paying our taxes, voting in these elections, and praying for our nation and its leaders, but as citizens of heaven we must give to God what is God’s by offering all that we are, and all that we have to Him as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice. In other words, we

owe some things to government, but we owe everything to God. *All* of our heart, *all* of our soul, *all* of our mind, and *all* of our strength. Caesar can have our money, but he can't have our hearts, souls, and minds. The politicians, leaders, and rulers of this world can't have us, because we're already taken. We belong to God. Not only did He make us, on the Cross at Calvary, He bought us at a price (1 Corinthians 6:20).