

Pentecost XXIII (Proper 24)

Mt 22.15-22

October 19, 2008

Fr. M. Dow Sanderson

+++

They were members of two distinct political parties. They did not at all care for each other. They questioned each other's motives. They questioned each other's patriotism. And they didn't miss an opportunity to represent... or even *misrepresent* their opponent in the worst possible way.

Ah, if only we still had bumper stickers! But these two parties have long since faded away. They were the **Pharisees** and the **Herodians**.

The Pharisees were mavericks. And yet, they wanted change that could be believed in. ...Liberal in their political agenda to get rid of the hated Romans (who, as it turned out, DID have weapons of mass destruction)... and yet conservative in their social agenda.

The Herodians were the party of the status quo. Yes, the Romans were oppressors. But one had to be pragmatic about such things. If you had to make a deal with the devil in order to get by, so be it. And if, in making such a deal, there was a dollar to be made... all the better. Who could fault them?

Their leaders didn't *like* each other... and they didn't waste their breath in polite words.

But this Jesus seemed just the kind of threat who could bring about the impossible... he was the one enemy on which they both agreed. He was dangerous, and the quicker they could expose him as an imposter...they happier they would be.

And so they set their trap... They set out deliberately to entangle him... to snare him as easily as trapping a bird... or so they thought.

First, the unctuous words. *Teacher, Rabbi, Holy Man of Israel, we know that you are good and honest and impartial. We know that you treat all people with fairness and would never deceive anyone. Tell us then. Should a faithful man of God pay taxes to an emperor who does not share our faith?*

It was the perfect question, and they had thought about it carefully. If Jesus said, *no*, then the Romans would arrest him immediately for stirring up sedition. If he said *yes*, then all who had admired him would be disillusioned... rejecting him as a "company man" who colluded with their hated oppressors.

But they never expected his answer. *Give me a coin.* How clever. He didn't even *have* any Roman money. He made them pull the coin out of their own pocket! This made it very clear, did it not? They might have talked about putting their trust in God... but when it came down to the cold, hard realities of the world... they wanted cash. *In God we trust...* is a perfectly lovely slogan... as long as its printed on our money.... as long as it gets us what we want.

And then came the punch line that will forever be remembered.

Whose image is this?Render therefore to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's.... and render unto God the things that are his.

I suppose they really should have seen it coming. After all, it was in their DNA.... This tendency to hedge their bets...

When Moses had taken a little longer on the mountain than seemed prudent, they had Aaron make the golden calf so that they would have something to worship they could put their hands on...

When they looked around and saw the splendor of other countries... the peoples with rich traditions and impressive buildings... they said to Samuel... *We're tired of being the subjects of an invisible God...we want to be like everybody else... we want a King...we want the palaces... we want a strong army. We want respect in the world!*

When they had their King... after only three generations...they could no longer tolerate what they had asked for. Solomon had died. And his son had an opportunity to heal the divisions..

But the new King was a Southerner...as they *all* had been... and the Northerners resented his regional preferences... Their taxes were too high. And when the legislature had to stay an extra session down in Jerusalem, the King didn't even want to pay them their *per diem!*

And so, in a little display of prescient irony.... The *North* succeeded from the *South!*

And here's the kicker...the new Northern King built his own holy places *just to keep his people from going to that temple down in Jerusalem.*

If my religion doesn't serve my purpose...then I will amend it until it does. I will render unto myself the things that are God's... and use them to strengthen my grasp on the things that are Caesar's.

And that, my friends, is the sin to which we are all susceptible ...and the reason why this Gospel still rings true in our hearts...and has such contemporary applications.

In what do we ultimately put our trust?

God? Or Caesar? Or like our brothers and sisters of old, do we attempt to play one against the other.

Patriotism is a fine and noble thing. But a blind, unwavering nationalism unchecked by the righteousness of God... is a very dangerous thing.

The early 20th Century essayist GK Chesterton put it very succinctly: *My country, right or wrong* is like saying, *my mother, drunk or sober...*

Regardless of who wins whatever election in any given year... Regardless on what the economy does or does not do... and yes, these are important concerns...But not ultimate concerns...

For our commonwealth is in heaven. And from it, we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And on this day, as we come again to offer, our selves, our souls and bodies...we are mindful that we do so, because we are rendering unto God... the things that are his. For we bear his image and likeness. We have been signed with his cross, and marked as his own forever.

+++Amen