

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. “Is it lawful to pay census tax to Caesar or not?”



“Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Matthew 22, 15-21

What's your attitude to the government that is currently in power in your country of residence? It seems to me that there is something in all of us that makes us wary of the governments we elect and the bureaucracies they create. We all have a wide range of reactions to the decisions taken by the political leaders we have elected. Sometimes we regard them as benevolent. At other times we find them menacing, and, oftentimes, we find them frustrating. Governments can arrest us, tax us, exile us, enlist us, harangue us, treat us as though we cannot think for ourselves and bombard us with all kinds of paperwork. They can fine us if we decline to vote in elections, and can burden us with a whole range of compulsory taxes. Despite giving notional assent to the reality that our government is in place as the consequence of the collective expression of our wishes recorded at the ballot box, we often feel distanced by the power and control our elected representatives exercise. In our cynical moments we variously label our politicians as “shadowy figures”, pork-barrellers, lobbyists, former high-school debaters, “wheelers and dealers”, “being on the take” or having wizened memories. We make them targets of our dissatisfaction.

It seems as though things haven't changed much over the centuries. Jesus and his contemporaries, however, had more than one reason to be critical, suspicious and cynical about the political powers of their day because they were living under an occupying government. The question that the Pharisees contrived for Jesus was a very clever one, for it set him up, however he might answer, to be on a hiding-to-nothing. He would either run foul of the occupying Romans or alienate the populace who understandably detested their invaders. In answer to their question, Jesus' antagonisers had calculated that he would either buckle or bristle.

Down the centuries, his followers have not exactly covered themselves in glory when governments have trampled on the powerless and committed unspeakable atrocities against ethnic minorities. When the Nazis ruled much of Europe, the voice of the Christian churches was all but inaudible. In Pinochet's Chile, more than 30,000 Chilean citizens disappeared, with little or no protest from the Church. The Church has, indeed, had a checkered history in its opposition (or, rather, lack of it) to oppressive governments.

Today's gospel finds Jesus confronted with government. The situation in which he finds himself is doubly delicate. First, because the government in question is an armed, Roman occupation force, hell-bent on filling the coffers of Rome through extortionate taxes imposed on the Jewish people. Second, because Jesus does not even have the support of the religious leaders of his day. Worse still, instead of standing in opposition to an oppressive regime and in support of their own people, the Pharisees try to trap Jesus into offending the Romans. Jesus' own co-religionists are much more interested in having him fall foul of their enemies than in hearing a truthful answer to the question with which they try to catch him out.

So how exactly does Jesus fare? His response is clever enough. However, it provides no great revelation, and certainly gives no suggestion that religious practice will provide magical cures for dealing with the force of government. Jesus merely says that Caesar should get what he deserves, and so should God. The first part of his response about Caesar being given what he deserves seems to be dripping with irony. (We say similar things ourselves when, on seeing some scoundrel in government get his come-uppance, we make comments like: "It couldn't have happened to a nicer bloke.")

However, underlying Jesus' answer to the Pharisees is a very clear message: religious people need to be very discriminating in their reactions to government. None of us can use government and its decisions, decrees and laws for avoiding genuine charity and compassion. That's what true discriminating is all about.

Many of us might have preferred Jesus to have given Caesar and the Romans a real broadside. That would have given us a licence to vent our spleen against the governments of our own day. Jesus' response is subdued and balanced. He does not even go close to the view expressed by Isaiah who, in today's first reading, describes Cyrus, King of Persia, as God's instrument for freeing Israel from slavery in Babylon: "I appoint you", says God to Cyrus. "I have given you great honour, although you do not know me." (Isaiah 45, 4)

Jesus makes no such claim for Caesar's occupying government, nor for any other government. Probably he took them on their own terms, and saw in them a mixture of the good, the inept and the fragile that is to be found in all people.

Jesus would have been familiar with what Isaiah had written about King Cyrus II. However, he may not have known anything about the Greek historian Herodotus and what he had to say about Cyrus I, grandfather of Cyrus II. According to Herodotus, Cyrus I once lectured a delegation of his fellow Persians on the fate of a government that gets too fat and powerful: "Soft countries," he said, "breed soft men." In his commentary on this, Herodotus went on to say: "The Persians had to admit that this was true, and chose rather to live in a rugged land and rule than to cultivate rich plains and end up becoming slaves." Cyrus II did not share that wisdom. Jesus, on the other hand, chose to live in a rugged land.

Jesus made the point that God and Caesar do not have to be at odds. However, when Caesar oversteps the mark and tramples on the rights and dignity of citizens, then the Gospel demands that Caesar be challenged. The stance that Jesus adopts calls us to approach the complexities and challenges that face humanity with God's vision of compassion and justice, which upholds and protects the dignity of all.