

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 22 October 2023 + MHT + Isa 45 + Mt 22

I think we can all agree that unfortunately, people today are too quick to put a political slant to almost anything. Maybe it's because of the 24/7 news cycle, which has so much airtime to fill up. Maybe it's because we live in the most diverse society in our nation's history, with few shared values. Whatever the cause, whether you are a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or something else, I think all of us can also agree the political landscape in our country today is not pretty. So as Catholics, is there any way for us to rise above our political problems? And how can we speak about politics in the Church without being accused of being biased or political? Well, our Gospel today is a good place to start.

First, it is important to recall the context of the Gospel; that is, the Pharisees cannot stand Jesus, and so they are looking for a way to trip him up. They see Him as a threat to their own political power, and so they want to silence Him. And so they devise what they think is a clever scheme in order to *entrap [him] in speech*. That is, if Jesus says that the Jews should pay the census tax to Caesar, the despised Gentile ruler, then Jesus' own people would turn on Him. But, if He says they shouldn't pay, then He would be in trouble with the Roman authorities. They think they have Him caught between a rock and a hard place.

But notice in all of this there is one major factor that is of no concern of the Pharisees, and that is the *truth*. They don't care about what is right or wrong. They just want to 'win': which is so often the Achilles heel of politics. And so it is bitterly ironic, and sad, that they begin their trap by saying, *Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth*. They know that Jesus teaches the truth, but they don't seem to care about it. And so they condemn themselves, and become a warning to us, not to allow our politics to fall into the same disregard for truth.

You see, we also live in a time in which we have a real *crisis of truth*. What is truth? Who can you trust? Is there even anything to trust in? Well yes there is, and that Truth is a person: Jesus Christ. Jesus teaches the truth, because He reveals to us His Father, who is our Father, and who is also the Creator, the foundation of all reality, and He Himself *is* the truth. This is why Jesus tells us in St. John's Gospel: *if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (cf. 8:31b-32)*. The truth is liberating because it is a participation in God Himself! And this means that true freedom is not found in political power, but rather in knowing *and* following the Truth.

But how do we know we can trust Jesus? Well, the Pharisees answer this question as well. They go on to say: *you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status*. In other words, Jesus can be trusted, because He seeks to please no one but His Father. And He is free to teach us the whole truth, even if it is not politically correct,

because He is *not concerned with anyone's opinion* or their *status*. All He cares about is the truth, doing His Father's will, making the Father known, and so leading us to salvation. We are so very blessed as Catholics to be able to rise above the fog of doubt, and the shifting sands of the popular and the political, and to be secure in the truth, who is Jesus Christ.

This gift that we have of knowing the Truth should help all of us to breathe a little easier, and it shouldn't be taken for granted. In fact, it should propel us to embrace our freedom. Just think about what this world would be like if all people sought the truth, and not just what is politically self-serving. Imagine what this world would be like if we didn't pay attention to other peoples' opinions of us, or if we all sought each other's good, and so we could trust each other? If we all followed Christ's example, then we would be free indeed!

Finally, we need to look at how Jesus replies to the Pharisees' disingenuous question: *repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God*. While this is not the time nor the place to engage in a deep study of political philosophy, there are a few conclusions that we can draw from this perfect response. First, there is a legitimate sphere of influence held by earthly authorities. So long as Israel was under Roman law and used the Roman currency which bore his likeness, Caesar could tax his subjects at a fair and just level. Of course, one might reasonably argue that it was unjust for Caesar to be the ruler of 1st century Israel in the first place, and that Jesus was leaving the door open to resistance.

However, what is most important here is that Jesus also reveals that Caesar's power was not absolute. Recall how the Caesars at different times in history made themselves to be gods. Jesus is answering a definitive 'no' to this fantasy. Roman coins may have borne the image of Caesar. But human beings, including Caesar, according to the book of Genesis, bear the image of God their Creator (Gn 1:26). Therefore, we belong to God alone. This means that all earthly authority, all government, derives its authority from God, and only can claim such authority to the degree that it has been granted by God. No earthly, human authority can ever claim the absolute rule over any people. Sure, this happens all the time, but it is not true authority; in fact, it is blasphemy.

On a practical level, this limit to earthly authority is the basis for our belief, first explained by St. Augustine and more recently used by Martin Luther King, Jr., that an unjust law is no law at all, and should be resisted. And as October is Respect Life month, it is good for us to be reminded that laws which allow one group of people to have absolute power over the lives of others, such as those allowing abortion or euthanasia, are no laws at all. And the Church's defense of all life, from conception to natural death, is not Her 'being political'. We are simply speaking the liberating truth and reminding all people, as the prophet Isaiah reminds King Cyrus of Persia in our 1st reading today, that the Lord is God, and we are not.