29th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 18 Oct 2026 + MHT + Isa 45 + Mt 22

I mentioned in my homily last weekend that in this latter part of St. Matthew's Gospel, we hear the tension rising between Jesus and the religious authorities of the Jewish people. Rather than coming to repentance and faith in response to the parables that the Lord directed at them, today we hear *they went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech*. So they devise a "gotcha" question, which is still common among political opponents even today. That is, if Jesus says that the Jews should pay the census tax to Caesar, the despised Gentile Roman ruler, then the Jews 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 the Lord caught between a rock and a hard place.

So 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.* Now, in this very statement they condemn themselves. That is, if they actually believe the Lord tells the truth, then it's clear that they don't care about the truth, because they are trying to bring down a truth-teller. It is clear that they just want to win: they want worldly power. On the other hand, if they actually believe that the Lord is a liar, then they themselves are telling a lie here! Either way, as we said, in this very trap, they condemn themselves. They deserve no reply from the Lord, because they don't really want an honest answer. They don't care about the truth.

Now let's pause here a moment and ask: what happens when people do not care about the truth? Well, just think about what happened a little later, when Jesus is brought before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, but he doesn't really care. All that matters is pragmatism: He doesn't want to upset an unruly crowd and so face the ire of his own Roman overlords. So Pilate condemns an innocent man to His death. Put simply, Christ died on account of disregard for the truth. The late Pope Benedict once wrote that when we no longer care about the truth, *the rule of pragmatism is imposed, by which the strong arm of the powerful becomes the god of this world (Jesus 2, 193)*.

Back to the parable. The Pharisees go on to say to the Lord: *you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status*. In other words, Jesus is the exact opposite of them. He doesn't care at all about political pragmatism. All that matters to Him is doing the will of His Father. Imagine what this world would be like if all people followed Christ's lead, and didn't pay attention to others' opinions of us, but only cared about the truth—about God's will?! We would finally be free! The freedom that all people long for, that this world rages to achieve, will never come about through human power. In John's Gospel, Jesus says to the Jews that *believed* in Him: *If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free* (8:31-32).

And so the Lord was the most free man to ever walk the face of the earth. He could teach the whole truth of God, unhindered. But sadly, He was also not a very popular man. When He began His public ministry, especially when He healed the sick, crowds flocked to Him. But as soon as His message got tough: teaching repentance, picking up one's cross, love of enemies, and that He was sent by the Father as the Bread of life, then He lost His luster.

So what is the Lord's reply to the Pharisees' disingenuous question? *Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,* He says, *and to God what belongs to God.* It's a perfect answer that must had confounded the Pharisees. Basically, He is saying *yes*, 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 the Roman Caesar's likeness, then Caesar could tax them. Now one could get into questions about the Rome's very presence in 1st century Israel, and what constitutes just taxation and so on. But those are not the primary concerns here.

Rather, what is most important here, is that Jesus also reveals that Caesar's power, and by extension, all human power, is not absolute. Recall how the Roman Caesars at different times in history made themselves out to be gods. Well, Jesus is saying a definitive 'no' to this lie. 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 our Creator: *we are made in God's own image and likeness* (cf. Gn 1:26). Therefore, God has ultimate authority over all human activity. This means that human authority, any government, only has authority to the degree that has been granted by God. Which means no earthly, human authority can ever claim the absolute rule over any people. To make such a claim 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—meaning, any law not grounded in truth—is no law at all, and should be resisted. And as October is Respect Life month in the Church, 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 in fact no laws at all. And we are bound by the truth who is God to resist them with all peaceful means. The Church's defense of all life, from conception to natural death, is not Her 'being political'. It is being faithful to our Baptismal call to speak the truth; just as the Prophet Isaiah had to remind King Cyrus of Persia in our 1st reading today that the Lord alone is God. Man is not God.

Finally, if we bear God's image, then we also have the duty to repay to God *what belongs to God,* and to *give the Lord glory and honor* in our very lives! Everything we have is His! And so the meaning and purpose of our lives is to love and serve the one true God, and to make Him known in the world.