

Homily based on the readings from October 22, 2023 (Isaiah 45.1, 4-6; 1 Thessalonians 1.1-5b; Matthew 22.15-21)

“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Some older translations of the Bible use the following wording, which may be more familiar to most people: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” If a similar conversation were taking place today, I envision somebody handing Jesus a quarter – 25 cents – and him admonishing us to “Render unto Washington the things which are Washington’s.” The overall point would remain largely unchanged.

On a basic level, this passage affirms the need for Christians to respect the civil authorities – regardless of whether or not we view those authorities as being on “our side.” The Emperor Tiberius, who was probably the *Caesar* to whom Christ was referring, was certainly not a friend to the Jewish people. About ten years earlier, in fact, he had expelled virtually all practitioners of Judaism from the city of Rome.

Moreover, it is likely that the actual coin that Jesus was holding contained a blasphemous inscription, identifying Tiberius as being the son of the Divine Augustus – in other words, repeating the state-sponsored lie that the Emperor Augustus had become a god after his death.

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans, makes almost exactly the same point as Christ did in today's Gospel:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. ... Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (13.1, 7)

For the sake of context, Saint Paul probably wrote this letter during the reign of the Emperor Nero, who is infamous for his violent and sadistic persecution of Christians.

The message here is that – as Christians – we have an obligation both to respect the civil authorities and to engage constructively in the political system. We need to pay our taxes, vote regularly and with a well-formed conscience, protest peacefully against any injustices we encounter, and – when we are called to do so – serve honorably in the military. We do not have the luxury of excluding ourselves from civil society just because we dislike a particular officeholder. Over the past twenty years, I have heard people across the political spectrum chanting “not my president,” in reference to whoever was residing in the White House at the time. That sentiment, although understandable, is completely untenable. To be blunt: if the earliest Christians could respect the authority of Nero and Tiberius, all of us today can respect the authority of Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Our participation in civic life is not just a matter of obligation, but a distinctive opportunity for giving witness to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ. It is no secret that our nation’s political discourse has become wearily vicious and mean-spirited. The antidote to anger, of course,

is not more anger. As with everything we do, we need to approach this situation with kindness, generosity, and self-sacrifice. The only way to have any positive effect on civil society is by doing our utmost to embody the Beatitudes: blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. By living out this example, we can remind our brothers and sisters that there is a *truth* that is far more substantial and more enduring than whatever controversies are currently swirling around on cable news and social media.

The point, of course, is that *render unto Caesar* is only half of Christ's command. The rest of the sentence is equally important: *[render] unto God the things that are God's*. An instructive historical example is Saint Polycarp, a Greek-speaking bishop who lived in western Anatolia during the 1st and 2nd centuries. As a young man, he is actually believed to have been a disciple of the Apostle John. When he was 86 years old, the local authorities demanded that he burn incense to the Emperor – this time Antoninus Pius – and that he publicly declare that “Caesar is Lord.”

He firmly refused and was burned alive at the stake. Although he was willing to offer the Emperor his obedience and respect as a civil leader, he did not – he could not – worship the Emperor in place of Christ.

It may seem unlikely, in this day and age, that anyone would ask us to burn incense to our political leaders. Nevertheless, we are all subject to similar pressures, albeit more subtly than in ancient times. We face a constant barrage of demands – both from our enemies and our allies – to put our political allegiance ahead of our religious convictions. Anyone who pays attention to current events can cite countless examples of governmental bodies attempting to compel individuals or groups of Christians to engage in activities that would violate their consciences. What is even more insidious, though, is the incessant temptation to subordinate our faith to a particular political ideology. Despite what some partisan operatives would have us believe, salvation *cannot* be achieved through winning an election or passing a piece of legislation. The attempt to elevate politics to the level of a religion is not only grossly misguided, but constitutes a form of idolatry.

Ultimately, these issues all boil down to a simple matter of perspective. Regardless of what our birth certificates say, as *Christians* we must remember that our true citizenship is in heaven. While we abide here on earth, we have a duty to serve as best we can the individuals and institutions entrusted with our governance. Nevertheless, there is only one authority to whom we owe our complete and unquestioning allegiance: the Lord of heaven, the Lamb upon his throne, the King of all. Caesar and Washington can have their coins, but in God alone we put our trust.