

Fr. Tim Ralston – Homily for October 16, 2011

“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” Words of Jesus in today’s Gospel. Jesus gives this answer in response to a question about whether or not Jews should pay the census tax to the government. And rather than just giving a simple yes or no, Jesus uses the opportunity to teach an important lesson to His listeners. It’s a lesson that He is still trying to teach to all of us today.

First, Jesus answers the question with His own question. Taking a Roman coin, Jesus asks the basic question, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” The answer, of course, was that the image and inscription was that of Caesar. This, then, prompts the brilliant answer of our Lord. “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus is acknowledging that there are civic responsibilities and duties that are part of the lives of all people, including the people of God. For us, our Christian faith actually impels us to be good and faithful citizens, rather than excusing us from this. This means that, yes, we should pay our taxes. We should also give our loyalty to a legitimate government and obedience to good laws. We need to keep ourselves informed about the major issues facing our country, our state, and our local communities, so as to be able to make good choices when election time rolls around. These are some of our responsibilities as American citizens. These are some of the ways we repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

However, we also have another citizenship, a heavenly one. And just like our earthly citizenship, our heavenly citizenship comes with responsibilities and duties that we are called to carry out. The question that Jesus asked His audience in today’s Gospel comes back into play. But rather than asking about a Roman coin, this time the question is asked about us. Jesus looks at us, both collectively and individually, and He asks, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?”

The answer, of course, is that it is God’s image and inscription. For we have been created by God our Father, in His own image and likeness. So we bear that image still today. We are like a little coin bearing the image and likeness of the Divine Emperor. And we also know that God’s law has been written on our hearts, or rather, inscribed there. God provides the natural law to His children so that we can more easily discern what is good and proper from that which is evil. So, we can clearly see that, when we look at human life, including our own life, we should see the image and the inscription of God Himself.

So, then, we belong to God, and we are called to return to God what it is that belongs to Him. This means our duties as citizens of a heavenly kingdom include giving our loyalty to God and our obedience to His commands. It means that we take the gifts, blessings and talents that He has given us, and give them back in service to Him and to His people. These are the “taxes” we pay to God, for the good of the kingdom and the good of the other citizens. In short, our responsibility as citizens of God’s kingdom, is to give ourselves, our entire lives, to the Lord.

This means that our spiritual lives cannot be relegated to just another compartment of our life. We can’t say, “Monday through Friday from 9 to 5 is my work life.” “The early mornings and the evenings are my family life and my social life.” “And Sunday, for an hour, is my spiritual life.” We sometimes try to do this, but it never works.

Our spiritual lives, our faith, must permeate and guide everything that we do. Once we have been baptized into Christ, and into a sharing of the divine life, then our entire lives are for Him. We are Christians, disciples of Christ. And our discipleship must be with us all throughout this earthly journey. So, when we are at work, we are still called to be a disciple of Christ. When we go grocery shopping, we are still called to be a disciple of Christ. When we’re driving down 75 and someone cuts us off, we are still called to be a disciple of Christ. And when we fulfill our duties as an American citizen, we are still called to be a disciple of Christ.

Just as our heavenly citizenship does not excuse us from fulfilling our duties as earthly citizens, so, too, our earthly citizenship must never interfere with our fulfilling our duties to God. We have dual citizenship. And both should make us proud. We should fulfill our responsibilities as citizens of this great country with pride, with faithfulness and with honor. But we must always recognize that the image and inscription we bear are God’s. So let us strive to fulfill the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel. “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”