

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Year A October 18, 2026

Readings

Is 45:1, 4-6

Ps 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

1 Thes 1:1-5b

Mt 22:15-21

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1939 – 2022

Flattery is excessive praise, whether true or untrue, usually employed to make someone lower his guard and become vulnerable. In the Gospel I just read to you (Matthew 22:15-21), Jesus was being setup by a hostile group who hoped to trap him in a set of conflicting allegiances. Seemingly agile, their attack was actually cumbersome, and so it failed.

It is important to remember that every Israelite owed complete allegiance to the one true God. But being annexed by Rome meant acknowledging the sovereignty of the earthly emperor, who had also taken on divine status. This was repulsive to the Jews. It meant that they had to face a terrible choice: submit to the empire's demands or eventually be annihilated. They had prevented destruction for more than a century of occupation by pursuing a course of delicate negotiation and careful compromise, which allowed them to maintain their religious practices and beliefs but submit to Roman taxation and control.

The first blunder of Jesus' adversaries is to be caught carrying the coin of the realm, a coin stamped with the image of a man claimed to be divine. This is shameful and they would never have handed over such a coin if Jesus had not caught them off-guard. The second blunder was much more subtle. Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." But what belongs to God? Of course, every Jew present knows that the answer is *everything*. So to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's means to give him nothing.

Sadly, this text is often used by American theorists and pundits as the scriptural justification for the principle of separation of Church and State. It has nothing to do with that. Jesus would not busy himself with such matters. He is saying that everyone's ultimate and complete allegiance is to God alone. Any other claim is a delusion. It is debated only by those whose vision is riveted to temporal and passing things, in other words, the people who made daily use of the very coins they now hope will undo the Lord. They dug a pit in Jesus' path, but fell in it themselves.

But what about us? For years, this story most effected me as evidence of Jesus' marvelous skill as a debater. He easily anticipated his opponents and turned their attack back onto them. But this misses the deeper point. This exchange is not designed to elicit our admiration but to provide for our instruction.

Caesar was envied as a man of enormous power, privilege, and possessions. We know such envy, too, toward those who have a larger share of the those things prized by this world. None of us is immune from such resentment. This means we are victims of a delusion. We do not see the ultimate emptiness of these things as clearly as Jesus did. On the contrary, we may think they are to be pursued with fervor. We may very well see such people as "successful" and envy them or detest them for it. Jesus would say that both they and we are victims of a delusion.

All these things are only *provisional* goods and should be valued and used as such. They cannot and do not supply us with the ultimate, lasting fulfillment for which God has created us and which we should be seeking. Most often, we come to this realization rather late in life (if we come to it at all!). Sometimes it hits us like a brick. We become confused and disillusioned, in the best way, because we are being stripped of our illusions. Reality hurts, but illusions kill. If our illusions are shattered along the way it means that no ultimate harm will come to us, because

what we have lost is unreal. Being mesmerized by them is the real danger. It remains for us to pursue what truly is real, to keep these other seductive goods in their proper perspective. It's no wonder that Jesus made the first beatitude "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

To Jesus' way of thinking, the dominion of Caesar is no dominion at all. To see it a true dominion is like trying to drink the water of a mirage. If we are infatuated with power, privilege, and possessions, we are no different from those who kneel before false altars and worship false gods. This is, of course, a violation of the very first commandment.

But how do we deal with those worldly prizes? Are they evils that are to be avoided at all costs. The answer is no! They are goods to be put at the service of Jesus Christ, to be shared with the poor, the sorrowing, the meek, the merciful, the prayerful, the clean of heart and the persecuted, all the clear-sighted members of His kingdom, the very people we aspire to become.