

## Homily: 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

There's something of an unholy alliance in operation in the Gospel today. The Pharisees and the Herodians actually can't stand each other – the Pharisees want the Roman occupiers out of Israel, whereas the Herodians like the benefits of being part of the Roman empire and are happy to pay their taxes to Caesar. But these two groups – who do not belong together – share a common dislike for Jesus and are keen to get rid of Him.

The trap they set is a simple one: if Jesus says, "Yes, pay the taxes to Caesar", He will lose a great deal of support from the people; but if He says, "Do not pay", He could be arrested by the Romans for campaigning against the empire. It's a no-win situation. And before asking the question, they try to lull Jesus into a false sense of security by flattering Him with compliments: "We know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way", they tell Him. But whilst Jesus is honest, they are not, and the Lord sees through their hypocrisy.

He asks them to show them the coin with which they pay the tax. And they produce a denarius from their pocket – a sign that they carry the money of the empire and pay the taxes of the empire. For all their opposition to these taxes, the Pharisees still pay. Their hypocrisy is made visible for all to see. And when they examine the coin, they see the image of Caesar's head on it, and Caesar's name. "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar", the Lord then famously teaches, "and to God what belongs to God."

This disarms the Lord's opponents; but it also teaches us. Give to God what belongs to God. What is it that we are to give? Jesus says that the coin belongs to Caesar because it bears Caesar's name and his image; so whatever bears the image of God, and the name of God, must belong to God. In the account of creation in the book of Genesis, we are taught that God created us in His own image – we are the ones who bear the image of God. No other part of God's creation shares this privilege. In the book of the prophet Jeremiah we read the words "Lord, you are in our midst; we are called by Your name", and as Christians we bear the name of Christ. We bear the image of God; we carry the name of Christ. And so we belong to Him. What Jesus teaches us today is nothing less than this: that we belong to God and so should give our very selves back to Him.

We use the word "belong" in different ways. My car belongs to me – I own it. This is one sense. But when I say "I belong to this family" or "I belong to this parish" we don't mean that our family or our parish own us. We mean that we have a place there: it's our home, we belong there; we have relationship, belonging. It's true in a sense that God does own us – after all, He created us! – but He gives us freedom, and the true sense in which we belong to Him is as people who are in relationship with Him, who find our home with Him. We belong to God.

If I chose never to spend any time with my family, it wouldn't mean that I stopped belonging to it. But when I give time to my family, there is space for that relationship, that belonging, to be strengthened. In giving that time, I give to my family what belongs to my

family – in other words, me! What the Lord teaches today is very similar. We will always belong to God, whether we spend time with Him or not. But how much more beautiful it is; how much more fruitful, joyful and wonderful it is, to give ourselves to God in love, spending time with Him, listening to Him, rejoicing in Him. Then we see that we belong: we will always belong, both now and in eternity. Yes, we belong to God, who gives us freedom to walk away, but draws us back to Him in love. Let us then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – in other words, play our full part in building up the society in which we live; but let us first give to God what belongs to Him – our very selves, our whole lives, offered in His service.

Fr Andrew

