

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
(Isaiah 45:1.4-5 / Matthew 22:15-21)
19.10.2014

Dear brothers and sisters,

In today's gospel, we see the adversaries of Jesus trying to entrap Him in what he says. Pharisees and Herodians come to ask Him: "Is it permissible to pay taxes to Cesar or not?" Their ruse is obvious. If Jesus answers 'yes' He will lose the esteem of the people and be discredited as a traitor to the Jewish cause of independence from Rome. He will be seen as disloyal to Judaism, especially by the Pharisees who were anti-Roman. If Jesus answers 'no' He will be denounced by the Herodians, who were supporters of the dynasty of Herod, as fomenting rebellion against Rome. The sort of dilemma into which Jesus was plunged is quite easy to understand for Northern Irish people, is it not?

But **Jesus is cunning**. He avoids falling in the trap they set for Him by asking his questioners for a denarius, the Roman coin used to pay tax. They promptly produce one. In doing so, those who were so concerned about the payment of Caesar's tax prove they have and use Caesar's money. By using Caesar's money, they accept his imperial system and so they should be prepared to pay his taxes. Jesus has won the argument and can answer: "Give back to Caesar's what belongs to Caesar." Jesus has won the argument by shifting the question. He is no longer prisoner of the alternative. The answer he gives is in fact given by the questioners themselves, by their own behaviour: since they used Caesar's money, they should pay Caesar's tax!

Jesus is cunning. **We also have to be cunning**. When we are tempted to ask ourselves: 'Is it permissible to do something or not' or when someone asks us: 'Is it possible to do that or not', if we want to set ourselves free from the alternative, – because we know that truth is rarely 'black' or 'white' – the way forward is often to enlarge the perspective of the question; it is to look at the full picture and not just to focus on a detail. In this kind of situation, there is nothing better and wiser to do than to take a bird's view. If we do this, then what we discover is that the answer to the question is not in others but in ourselves or in those who have asked the question. The answer to our question will impose itself to us. Our conscience will be enlightened by widening out the question.

After having answered: 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, Jesus adds: 'and to God what belongs to God'. Jesus does not mean that there are things that belong to Caesar and others which belong to God, as if reality could be divided between the 'secular' and the 'sacred'. Things belong not to Caesar or to God but to Caesar and to God! Not 'either or' but 'and'. God and humanity are linked and inseparable. God cannot be known if not through humanity. God revealed himself in a man, Jesus. Every human being was created in God's image and likeness and so there is something divine in them. What Jesus means when he says "Give back to God what belongs to God" is that an obligation to Caesar is subordinate to a greater obligation: the authority of God.

Jesus does not offer a solution to the question of the relationship between Church and State. For Jesus, it is clear that a legitimate State has rights which a good citizen should respect. But for his disciples, there are times when they must listen to God rather than to the State. Jesus has given us

a general principle but this general principle has to be lived out in particular situations that are usually not black or white, and are often not at all clear. Frequently, the disciples of Jesus as members of the Church have to be content **to live with uncertainty**. Once again, I repeat it, truth is not black or white. We have to seek the truth. This takes time. During this gradual process, we feel uncomfortable. If we are honest, we have to confess that we don't like uncertainty, and so our temptation is to seek refuge in clear cut positions which can reassure us momentarily but are not true and life-giving.

In today's world, Caesar's place is taken by secular States, States which are not so much against God as without God. This poses serious problems for all Christians and not only those in public office. Christians have no right to impose their own values and beliefs on others, but nobody can ask them to support what is morally wrong and offensive to their conscience. This reality has been painfully lived out in our country in the recent past. Let us think of the debates around divorce, abortion, homosexuality, same sex marriage...

Today is **Mission Sunday**. And this year's theme is "That you may have life". To have a missionary spirit is not an option but a constitutive dimension of our baptismal vocation. A Christian is always on duty to make known Christ to others. Usually when we use the word 'mission', we think of those who go in a distant country to preach the Gospel. But mission begins at home. To begin with, it is at home that we have to work so that all may have life and have it to the full. We have to bear witness to gospel values in all the political or social debates of contemporary society so that the life of all may be not only respected but also helped to grow to its full stature.