

The theme for our morning's meditation is 'The ultimate loyalty that we owe to God'. In the gospel reading from the book of Mark we see the Pharisees and the Herodians coming to Jesus to catch him in his words. The Herodians were influential Jews who supported the Herodian dynasty, meaning they were supporters of Rome from whom the Herods received their authority. They joined the Pharisees in opposing Jesus because they feared that he might have an unsettling political influence. The Pharisees on the other hand were the successors of the Hasidim. They were pious Jews who joined forces with Maccabees during the struggle for freedom from Syrian oppression around 162 B.C. Although some of these were godly and pious people, most of those who came into conflict with Jesus were hypocritical, envious, rigid and legalistic. According to Pharisaism, God's grace extended only to those who kept the law.

The delegation puts forth a question to Jesus with all the flattery they can put into it, thinking that Jesus would swallow the bait and fall for the trap. They say, 'Teacher, we know that you are true and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of man but truly teach the way of the Lord. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not'. Though they address him as 'Teacher', they really did not acknowledge him as one. Also, though they say that Jesus is a 'man of integrity and that he cares for no man,' they actually did not accept it in the previous chapter of Mark, where we noted that they were questioning the authority of Jesus. Finally, they also say that 'we know that you truly teach the way of God'. Even though in the mouth of these people it is all flattery, Mark presents to us that it is indeed a true assessment of the 'Teacher'.

The tax collected here is the Poll -Tax- a tax of a uniform amount levied on each individual. In fact when it was first levied in A.D 6 it resulted in a revolt led by Judas of Galilee in the very same year. The underlying theology was that allegiance to God and to Rome as a pagan occupying power was fundamentally incompatible. The trap question in their thinking had only two possible answers: the first was to say, 'Yes we should pay tax to the Romans', which would mean that one must not be loyal to their own country and be subservient to Rome. The second was to say, 'No, we should not pay taxes to the Romans.' This would give the Herodians a good opportunity to book him for treason and rebellion. So either way they were confident that Jesus would be trapped.

Jesus responded to them in a unique manner which leaves them dumbfounded. He asks them to bring a denarius which was the recognized daily wage of a labourer (Matthew 20: 2). The silver denarius was the required coinage for tax payment and it carried a portrait of Caesar along with his official title: TIBERIUS CEASAR SON OF THE DIVINE AUGUSTUS. The reverse side had a representation of his mother Livya with the title 'HIGH PRIEST'. For a strict Jew this was politically and religiously

offensive. Jesus asks them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' 'Caesar's' they replied. Jesus said to them, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' Jesus' answer leaves them flabbergasted. The things that belong to Caesar were the taxes. Jesus shows that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, but he doesn't stop with that. He says, 'Give to God what belongs to God.' There are obligations to the State that do not infringe on our obligation to God and we are expected to do it. Paying taxes and fulfilling such obligations are essential. But what are the things of God that we need to render to God?

Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God, as we are told in Genesis 1:26. Just as the coin which bore Caesar's image belonged to Caesar, so also we who bear the image and likeness of God belong to God. Because we are made in the image and likeness of God we owe our ultimate loyalty to him. We can show our loyalty by obedience, love, faithfulness and truth. The question is whether we will lead our life with allegiance to the world, economy, mass media, consumerism, pleasure, status driven values and wealth? Or will we live out our allegiance to a living God, and to God's reign: the new community of upside-down kingdom values, which is the source of hope and transformation? May we choose this day and always to serve the Holy, generous, living, and loving God in whose image we are made.