Saint Thomas' and Saint Thomas' of the Air Church
Trinity XXIII
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rmcneely+

Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's
and unto God the things that are God's

I must set the scene:

It is a few days after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem
The day we remember as Palm Sunday.
The Pharisees are shocked to see the multitudes,
The spirit of the people,
The accolades they heaped upon Our Lord,
The affirmation that He was the long awaited Messiah
The shouts of Hosannah in the Highest.
The Pharisee's are nervous
They accurately perceive Jesus as a threat.
A threat to their position,
status and influence.
Their power,
control and wealth.

This man Jesus will turn the social order on its head
and the Pharisees cannot see
how it could end well for them.

They have been plotting for weeks
trying trick this self proclaimed Son of God
into disfavor,
rebuke
and scandal,
with the end to put Him to death
as quietly and as quickly as possible.
All without success to their intense frustration.

One of them has come up with another trap.
This one they know is so clever that there will be no escape.
It is a perfect conundrum:
no matter which way Jesus answers,
He will be downfallen.
It deals with taxes:
The annual Tribute that all Jews had to pay to Rome.
Failure to do so meant sedition
and certain death under Roman Law.
Rome allowed the Jews to have their own currency.
But the Romans
did not want to fuss with exchange rates
and the potential destabilization of the Jewish coinage.
So the annual tribute tax could only be paid with Roman money.

The Pharisee's asked Jesus to declare whether it was lawful to pay Tribute unto Caesar or not? And the trap was laid.

If Jesus said yes; it was lawful,
He alienated a large segment of the Jews
And begged the question
of breaking the first two Commandments.
You see, Caesar professed to be a god
and the Jews worshiped only the God
of Abraham,
Isaac
and Jacob.
To make things worse,
Caesar's image was minted on the Roman coinage
Which made it a vain idol to the Jews.
They could not have the Roman coin in the Temple
or even on their persons
for fear of desecration and blasphemy.
Jesus would be hated by the Jews if He said
"yes" it was lawful to pay the Tribute.

But if Jesus said it was not lawful to pay the Tribute,
He would be guilty of sedition under Roman law
and the Pharisees need only turn Jesus over to the Romans
with testimony
that He was encouraging the Jews not to pay their taxes
and Jesus would be executed within hours.

But Jesus, seeing the trap; did neither.

I practiced law for decades and have been in the interrogator's shoes.
You have the perfect question.
And no matter what the answer, your cause is advanced.
You build the trap.
Asking the foundational questions,
all the while stealthily closing off all escape routes.
You tingle with anticipation.
You finally ask the killer question waiting for the trap to spring shut.

But it didn't happen.
Jesus had again outsmarted the Pharisees.
You can almost feel the interrogator jerk upright in surprise, Huh.
What just happened?

Jesus turns the trap into an occasion
to teach a fundamental truth of Christianity,
echoed today in Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians.

The question in the Gospel may have been in the realm of taxes
(the inevitable cost of civil government of all ages)
but the principal concerns life.
Jesus said "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's".

Some see this Gospel as divine instruction to the division of the obligations of citizens and the obligations of Christians.
St Paul resolves it in favor of Our Lord in today's Epistle.

He observes:
"Our citizenship is in Heaven".
You see, our primary allegiance is to God.
Jesus' instruction:
"Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's
And unto God the things that are God's"
Has prompted some into a diverted discussion of the
Relationship of Christianity to National Citizenship.

The Church leaves to your good judgment
What to render unto Caesar.
But has great interest
in the determination of what we are to render unto God.
The Greek term translated "render"
literally means "to give back"
in the sense of paying back a debt that is owed.
Taken literally then, Jesus is saying
And "render", or "give back" to God, that which is God's.

The coin was an easy prop, because it had Caesar's image stamped on it.
It goes back to Caesar.
What do we know in our lives that bears the image of God?
Let's go back to Genesis:
There are three verses that command our attention:

"And God said, "let us make man in our image". . .
And;
"in the image of God, He created them man and woman."
And:
"When God created mankind he made them in the likeness of
God".

So the image of God is stamped . . . on us?
Are we the currency of God?
If so; are we to give ourselves back to God?

Are we inclined to give God all that we are?
If our minds (as least for an hour or two on Sunday), what about our hearts?
But God wants all 168 hours of that week.
We cannot say that "this part of my life belongs to God
so I will give it to God,
but this area of my life is none of God's business".

What of our income? Maybe we give 1 or 2% or maybe the entire 10% tithe.
But God wants 100%

What of creation? God made it all and it too bears His image. Are we to give it back to Him? How?
We are stewards of everything God created.

The last time I was in the Yosemite Valley
I took a walk to Mirror Lake
in the placid chill of a Fall morning
as the sun was beginning to warm the granite walls.
And in the still of the dawn,
the majesty of it all was almost palpable.

How can anyone fail to see the Hand of God at work in that peaceful morning light?
We give it back to God, by being good stewards of all He created.

We are also stewards of the pinnacle of God's creation:
Our fellow human beings.
We give ourselves back to God by caring for each other
Especially those who cannot care for themselves.

Everything we are and everything we have
belongs to God.
Everything we are and everything we have
we are to give back to God.
We are but managers or stewards of these gifts God has given to us.

Imagine for a moment, what it would look like if we gave our entire being to God.
Our homes would not merely be private places for ourselves
where we rest from our day's work,
where we eat
and sleep.
They would be sanctuaries that offer
comfort,
peace,
encouragement
and love.

Our families would not only be a bunch of people who share the same bathroom and compete for the TV remote
but would be centers of worship,
a place where godly values are shaped
and molded
and where unconditional love,
understanding
and forgiveness
are lived out.

Our possessions,
would not be the things that portray our value to others,
not be the evidence of who we are,
but we would use all our material assets to glorify God.

We give ourselves back to God because we are His.

This morning we have explored only two examples in which we can give back to God:

"Render unto God that which is God's."
You can no doubt find more.

He created us
to reflect the radiance of His love,
His compassion,
His friendship.
As we live our daily lives.

As we leave through those doors today,
let us contemplate the things in our lives
that God wants us to give back to Him.

Render unto God that which belongs to God.
Give Him our lives
Let our lives be an act of worship
In His glory
and honor.