

29th Sunday 2014

Matthew 22: 15-21

A vast literature comes from this gospel. It's about church and state, culture and religion, politics and faith. If you want to pursue this, I recommend the Jesuit weekly *America*, the ecumenical *Christian Century*, or, if you want traditionalism with an edge, *First Things*. These will help you to find your stand, or support your stand, on how faith relates to contemporary issues. I am not going to add to that literature in this homily. Not because I am indifferent, or unqualified, or afraid of controversy. But rather because a homily should give spiritual sustenance to left and to right, and if possible, draw us more together. Are you with me?

I also wonder whether Jesus foresaw this vast literature. Did he speak off the cuff with a gleam in his eye? "Whose face *is* this? [scratch of head; squint at the coin] Caesar's? Well, *give* to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to *God* what is God's." Our Lord is not quite so pompous or prelatial as we like to make him. He had wit and irony in his rhetorical arsenal, and sent them flying like arrows. Down the centuries we have made such witty sayings incredibly ponderous. If not politics, what? First, I thought I could trace the coin, with or without Caesar, through the gospels. The ones in the wise men's box; the ones entrusted to the servants in the parable; the lost one found by that woman's diligent sweeping; the blood money given to, then rejected by, Judas. I could contrast this with the trivialization of coins in our own day. They shoot out at us from the cash register; they jingle in, and fall out of, our pockets; they accumulate in the little bowl on our dressers; they are eventually hauled over to that nifty coin-counting machine at Shoppers Food Warehouse. You see the sort of thing: entertaining, harmless, literary. Underneath is the metaphor of coin as self. How we spend it is how we use our moments and days.

Alternatively, I thought the thread might not be through the coin, but the way Jesus handles the situation. Today's gospel is a controversy story, one of many in which Jesus must deal with opponents and antagonists. In this story they slyly flatter him—"we know you are truthful and sincere; we know you can answer this question that troubles us." Jesus saw through this; he "knew their malice." They hope to say "aha! got'cha!" But instead, Jesus says, "ah, ah, ah, not so fast."

A precursor of the story is that of the temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27). Both of these are found only in Matthew. His gospel wants to portray the church, with a certain nationalism, as the new Israel: this has not always been a blessing for the church. In the earlier story, someone asks

Peter, “Does your master pay the temple tax?” It would not be in Jesus’ interests to answer no. But, as in today’s gospel, Jesus treats the issue playfully and indirectly. In private he asks Peter, “Does a king collect tribute from a stranger or a son?” Peter answers, “A stranger.” He knows that Jesus is “the Son” of the Temple-owner, and doesn’t need to pay the tax. Jesus says, “Correct. But to avoid giving offense to my enemies, go put a hook into the sea. The fish you catch will have a coin in its mouth. With it you can pay for you and for me.”

You can see why this story is omitted from the Sunday lectionary. It is delightful, and fabulous, something out of Aesop, a version of the tortoise and the hare. But what is the moral, and how can it be applied? Jesus is sidestepping. Perhaps the coin comes from within (if you are the fish), and you are to give of yourself. But no, he tells Peter to go back to his old way of life at the fishing boat. It is as if to say, civic duties are part of your old world, so keep up appearances; but now you are living with me in the new world. It’s a story to play with when you have plenty of time in your lectio divina.

The controversy story that is more profound and emotionally engaging than the stories of the temple tax or the Caesar coin, would be the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). This is “aha! got’cha” at a tragic level. She has been trapped, like an animal, and now she is being sprung as a trap to get Jesus. What shall we do with her? They know they are putting Jesus in a no-win situation. With his non-violence, he cannot say “stone her.” But allowing her to get away with it, a serious breach of the mosaic law, is not a good option either. Jesus, as he so often does, wiggles out of the dilemma; he boldly proposes a third way, hitherto unthought of. It is as if he takes each accuser by the heels, turns him upside down, so that all the coins which are his assumptions, drop out of his pockets, scattering, and never be recovered. It is what he will do for us, if we let him: liberate us from our tired old proverbs, and give us a third way of thinking and living. If we are the woman, the victim, backed against the wall, with no option, he also opens a third way.

“Aha! Gotcha!” Jesus says, “Not so fast, think again.” Let the one without sin cast the first stone. He doesn’t need to watch who leaves first, or who holds out the longest. Stooping, he doodles in the sand, a vulnerable position. But he wins.

And the woman wins in a way she could not have dreamt of. “Does no one condemn you?” “No one, sir.” “Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

Wow. This is really new world stuff. It also invites us to think how we want to spend our coins, the moments of our life. There are some things, like death and taxes and being caught in adultery, that we can't wiggle out of. But what about all the rest? Do we want to get and accumulate and take? Or do we let go and give? Do we want to be like the post-adulterous woman? No longer needing to sneak out and creep around, she can fly and soar. The authentic Christian life always takes the imaginative third option. God gives it, and there you find him.