**Readings for October 22, 2023 – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

‘What Belongs to God?

*Jesus places everything in its proper relationship to God. Here we see that “God is ultimately in charge and rules over even Caesar.” (From Bishop Robert Barron)*

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**Opening Prayer:** Loving Jesus, help us to know you better, so that we might always turn to you willingly, and in friendship. Help us to love you, and our neighbor, with our whole heart, and with a genuine “yes.” Amen.

**Reading 1** [**IS 45:1, 4-6**](http://usccb.org/bible/isaiah/45:1)

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp,  
subduing nations before him, and making kings run in his service,  
opening doors before him and leaving the gates unbarred:  
For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one,  
I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not.  
I am the LORD and there is no other, there is no God besides me.  
It is I who arm you, though you know me not,  
so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun  
people may know that there is none besides me. I am the LORD, there is no other.

**Responsorial Psalm** [**PS 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10**](http://usccb.org/bible/psalms/96:1)

R. (7b) **Give the Lord glory and honor.**  
Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all you lands.  
Tell his glory among the nations; among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.  
R.**Give the Lord glory and honor.**  
For great is the LORD and highly to be praised;  
awesome is he, beyond all gods.  
For all the gods of the nations are things of nought, but the LORD made the heavens.  
R. **Give the Lord glory and honor.** Give to the LORD, you families of nations,  
give to the LORD glory and praise; give to the LORD the glory due his name!  
Bring gifts, and enter his courts. R.**Give the Lord glory and honor.**  
Worship the LORD, in holy attire; tremble before him, all the earth;  
say among the nations: The LORD is king, he governs the peoples with equity.  
R. **Give the Lord glory and honor.**

**Reading 2** [**1 THES 1:1-5B**](http://usccb.org/bible/1thessalonians/1:1)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians  
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.  
We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers,  
unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love  
and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
before our God and Father,  
knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God, how you were chosen.  
For our gospel did not come to you in word alone,  
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.

**Gospel** [**MT 22:15-21**](http://usccb.org/bible/matthew/22:15)

The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.  
They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying,  
"Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man  
and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.  
And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion,  
for you do not regard a person's status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion:  
Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"  
Knowing their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?  
Show me the coin that pays the census tax."  
Then they handed him the Roman coin.  
He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?"  
They replied, "Caesar's." At that he said to them,  
"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

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Related Reflections

**Avoiding Traps**

The Pharisees are insincere. They converse with Jesus only so they can trick him into saying something incriminating. They have constructed a plot that will bring Jesus down. That is why they have brought along the Herodians. The Herodians want to keep Herod in power, and Herod stays in power at the behest of the Romans. The Romans keep him there to collect the taxes. If Jesus speaks out against taxes, it will be sedition against Rome…

If however, Jesus submits to the Roman tax, he will discredit himself as a prophet and lose his following. The people who follow Jesus hate Roman taxes. If the land belongs to God, what right do Romans have to collect taxes on everything from the fruits of the earth and animals to the fishes in the sea? Also, this taxation was crushing, an intolerable burden that included bribery and cheating. If Jesus sanctioned the taxation laws, it would contradict much of his preaching and teaching. This is the two-edged sword they hope will slice Jesus on either side… They are not interested in taxes and God. They are interested in undercutting the influence of Jesus.

Jesus does not have a Roman coin so he asks for one… This alone is an indication of where he is coming from. The Pharisees have asked a duplicitous question, so now Jesus includes them in the answer. [Jesus’ statement about Caesar] does not directly answer the question. It may mean: since everything belongs to God, pay nothing to the emperor. It may mean that the emperor has a certain domain, and God has a certain domain, and they should not be confused. It may mean: taxes to the emperor are permitted as long as they do not infringe on the laws of God. Whatever it means, it is a catalyst for further dialogue. The talk in the text may end, but the talk among those who read the text continues…

Most theological and spiritual matters are best approached by careful exploration and balanced evaluation. This is especially true when the interaction between the spiritual and social realms is being considered. This is more complex than a factual yes or no… Jesus does not best his opponents; he names their malicious and ego-driven game and refuses to play it. He names the terms of discernment, the everlasting tension between God and the emperor. This has to be a better map for how to reflect on the complexities of faith and society.

John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Teachers and Preachers*, Liturgical Press.

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Can God and Caesar co-exist? What if you are created to be a channel for God’s presence right in the midst of the secular world?

What if, in spite of the voices within you that say you are not worth much, in spite of the setbacks of life, the losses, the flatness, in spite of all these, what if God created you with room inside you where God, out of love for you, can be quietly present?

I can hear objections to such an idea: “God would never be at home in me, not until I do a lot better with my life.” Or, “You want me to be some kind of nut, running around acting holy?” Or, “Sure, I want to let God in, but I like beer and TV too much.” Or, “What does all this have to do with real life?” Or simply, “I don’t want to.” But what if God were a great friend? In fact, **how would it be if God were a companion** who truly and actually accepts you and forgives you completely whenever you need it? Wouldn’t this give you another way to look at the connection between heaven and earth?

Wouldn’t it mean that God put you and me into the world to be holy in it, to be friends with the things of Caesar? To work in the world of sin in spite of our own sins? Could it be that we ourselves are those “things that belong to God” that Jesus spoke of? “Belong,” not in a possessive way, but in the way felt by people who love and are loved. We “belong.” If this were so, why wouldn’t we want to give ourselves to God, and then also to bring our God-filled selves to Caesar’s palaces and to the dirty roads outside them and show everyone what Jesus is all about?

Which realm should we live in? Both.

John Foley, SJ (published on liturgy.slu.edu)

The Pharisees and Herodians are trying to get Jesus to speak in opposition to Caesar so that they can get Him in trouble with the Roman authorities. But interestingly, what they say of Jesus is quite true and is a great virtue. They say two things that highlight Jesus’ virtues of humility and sincerity:

1) “You are not concerned with anyone’s opinion;”

2) “You do not regard a person’s status.” Of course they went on to then try to trick Him into breaking Roman law. Jesus does not fall for their trick and does outsmart them in the end.

However, these virtues are good for us to reflect upon because we should strive to have them alive in our own lives. First, we should not be concerned with others’ opinions. But this must be properly understood. Sure, it’s important to listen to others and to consult them and to be open minded. Other people’s insights can be crucial to making good decisions in life. But what we should avoid is the danger of allowing others to dictate our actions out of fear.

Sometimes the “opinions” of others are negative and wrong. We can all experience peer pressure in various ways. Jesus never gave in to the false opinions of others nor did He allow the pressure of those opinions to change how He acted. Secondly, they point out that Jesus does not allow the “status” of another to influence Him. Again, this is a virtue. What we have to know is that all people are equal in the mind of God. A position of power or influence does not necessarily make one person more correct than another. What’s important is the sincerity, integrity and truthfulness of each person. Jesus exercised this virtue perfectly.

* Catholicreadings.org

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What actually belongs to Caesar?

One of the most memorable quotes of Jesus can be found in today’s Gospel— “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.” Jesus offers a disarmingly pragmatic response to a rather contentious political dilemma. What then can we learn from Jesus’ quick-witted reply? When we start from the premise that God created the heavens and the earth, we can conclude almost immediately that in fact nothing actually belongs to Caesar, on the contrary, everything belongs to God.

As St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Colossians “For in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him.” (Col 1:16) If we were to approach this passage from a legal standpoint as opposed to divine hierarchy, we can appreciate that it was a lawful requirement for the Emperor’s subjects to pay what is ‘due’ to him, in other words ‘tax’ which many of us, I am sure, simply cannot wait to pay!

However, even from an argument of good governance, the apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (Rom 13:1) We therefore can conclude, both from an argument of divine authority and from a legal perspective, that nothing actually belongs to Caesar. If our faith, as it stands equates to simply paying God his ‘due’ then our faith becomes nothing but a tick box exercise. This is not faith at all, but rather an arduous and superficial time-waster. Jesus reminds us that God desires not just a ‘part’ of us but indeed ‘all’ of us, for He created, loves, and sent His only Son to redeem us in the sure hope that we would return to Him. (Tim Mangatal, written as a seminarian in 2017 in London)

***Focusing the Gospel:*** Jesus is not fooled by the Pharisees and Herodians' shameful flattery, but sees through it to their malice and hypocrisy. These vices lead to a false dichotomy between earthly and divine kingdoms. Goodness and truth lead us to recognize our place and proper conduct in both kingdoms. When earthly kingdoms are guided by God's values and ways, they are no less than the spatial presence here and now of God's kingdom. And we pay only one tax: the self-giving that bears the image of Jesus.

***Connecting the Gospel*** ***to the First Reading***: God uses earthly realms, as in the case of Cyrus the Persian who liberates the Jews from Babylonian captivity, to further the presence of God's kingdom. There need be no opposition between them. And when there is, it's due to human malice and hypocrisy.

***Connecting the Gospel … to experience***: Sometimes what we owe to God can put us in conflict with the civil authority, for example, conscientious objection to war, policy decisions concerning poverty and environment, etc. When conflicts arise, is it Caesar or is it God we serve?

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**Our action response:** Do not just talk justice; be justice, which the church defines as giving to God and others what is due them. Give God reverence and praise. Give others respect, compassion, and presence. Be attentive to the opportunities to love. – Alice Camille

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Caesar,  
did you create the stars  
  and hurl them to the reaches of the universe?  
 Can you make blood course through human veins?  
Or craft a hummingbird or a Gerbera daisy?  
                                                                                      
Your coins can’t buy  
what we really need.

God,  
Creator  
you are the one  
 whose face we seek:  
the domain of love that  
you give in grace and peace.

We are made in your image.  
Please take us  
 as your  
 own.

Anne Osdieck , published on liturgy.slu.edu (The Center for Liturgy Study, St. Louis University)

Discussion Questions

Does it seem harder these days to belong to both God and the world? Why or why not?

Do you sometimes feel you have to “compartmentalize” your faith? To act one way in church, and another way on campus, or out in the world? How can I do more to integrate my faith throughout my life?

Can others tell that I am a person who puts God first – who has a friendship with Jesus?

What does this friendship call me to do, or be?

Are there times when you’ve found it challenging to make room for Jesus ahead of other things in your thoughts, words or deeds? When does this seem to occur most?

If we are all made in the “image and likeness” of God, what does that mean for how we treat others? Isn’t that person who is hard to get along with also made in this same way?

**Closing Prayer**

The earth is yours, O Creator, and all that dwells therein is sacred. There is nothing that exists without your mark of divine love. Enlighten our minds, open our hearts, empower us to act with love and with justice. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

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***Repeating our weekly focus prayer (adapted from St. Anselm):***

Oh Lord, teach us to love those who hate us, and pray for those who do us wrong. May we be the children of your love. Amen.

***Thoughts for the coming week:***

Give God praise and thanks that you belong to him. Think deeply about what it means to be on the side of One who is so great and loving – to know that we have an almighty God like this who is fully in charge.