

Reflection for the Twenty Ninth Sunday of the Church's Year

"The Herodians" don't often figure in the gospels but they are mentioned today alongside *"the Pharisees"* who are *"plotting how to entangle Jesus with his words."* Who are *"the Herodians"* and why are the Pharisees drawing them into their conspiracy? As their name suggests they are monarchists, followers of King Herod. While most of the Jewish population resented Roman occupation and were oppressed by it, King Herod and his followers had done well out of it. In return for their support and collaboration in matters like raising taxes they had been allowed to retain great status, privilege and wealth. The Pharisees are seeking to draw them into their conspiracy because they believe that with them they can entrap Jesus *"with his words"* using the issue of paying taxes to an occupying power.

The question put to Jesus isn't about paying taxes in general, but specifically about Jewish people paying taxes to Rome, an occupying power. And the question *"is it lawful?"* is specifically about whether doing so is in accordance with Jewish Law, which is, of course, the Torah, the Law of Moses. The Pharisees are plotting a clever trap pitching religious law against secular realities and they need the Herodians to pull it off. They intend to put Jesus in the middle of a crowd hostile to paying Roman taxes and then put him on the spot. If he supports paying taxes to Caesar to placate the Herodians and keep the peace, the crowds will turn against him. If he rejects the payment of taxes to Caesar, the Herodians will denounce him to the Romans as a trouble causer and have him arrested. So, the trap is set.

Jesus' answer has two parts: *"render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* Jesus isn't particularly interested in the first part - the rendering to Caesar - but he is very interested in the second part, rendering *"to God the things that are God's."* And this is true throughout his entire three-year public ministry during which he has been noticeably silent about the Romans and occupation. On the other hand, he has been noticeably vociferous about how the Jewish religious leadership – the Pharisees, chief priests, and lawyers – have failed *"to render to God the things that are God's."* He has repeatedly denounced them for their obsession with keeping rules about cleanliness, religious practices, and outward shows of their piety while they neglect basic human concern and charity. The second part of Jesus' answer *"render to God the things that are God's"* is, in fact, more loaded than the response to the question of paying taxes to an occupying power. With the first part *"render to Caesar"* he sets to one side their trap. With the second part *"render to God"* he once again rounds on the Pharisees and religious leaders for their failure to live up to God's calling.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" is one of the best known of Jesus' sayings. Let us never forget that there are two parts to this saying and that for Jesus it is the second part, *"render to God"*, which is the most important.