Biblical Text: Matthew 22:15-22

**Introduction**

The set up in our Gospel lesson today has been apparent from the day it happened. “They plotted to entangle him.” You had representatives of the Pharisees, who while not zealots about it, agreed with those zealot killers about paying anything to Rome. And they teamed up with the Herodians, the far opposite side of the political spectrum. The Herodians had sold out not just to Rome but to Rome’s puppet ruler – Herod Antipas. So when they asked the question about paying your taxes as a yes/no, it was meant as a division. One of that group, along with their portion of the crowds that had been following Jesus, would leave mad at Jesus. The politics of division.

But Jesus “aware of their malice” answers with one of those saying that has been debated ever since he said it. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s….and they marveled.” I’m obviously not going to be the last word on this on a random day in late October in a breezy 15 mins. But I do hope to maybe scrape off some of the deadening accumulation that we might get a glimpse of why everyone marveled.

We’ve domesticated the saying. We hear it and simply turn it into the proto-separation of church and state. Caesar has his realm, which requires taxes. And God has his realm, which? Well, we disagree what it requires. More later. But these two Kingdoms are able to be separated and each come to some logical agreement. Says every liberal arrangement ever quoting Jesus.

Or less likely we’ve radicalized the saying. Everything is God’s, including what is Caesar’s. So the actual goal is to take over the government and run it according to God’s standards. Says every theocrat ever quoting Jesus. And just because like most Americans we are probably liberals, don’t dismiss that logic. The vast majority of people in most times and places would have easily agreed with the theocrat. The job is to 100% align.

And both liberal and theocrat are Romantic about their ability to do these things in this world. Personally, I might be romantic about baseball, but not much else. Also I don’t think Jesus was a Romantic. When you are walking toward the cross, thoughts of utopia aren’t easy. No, the gnomic sayings of Jesus tend to be hard-headed.

**Text**

And I think to more fully marvel at what Jesus says we have to understand the context. Just a couple of days ago in the story Jesus was swept into town on a donkey to the cries of Hosanna. The King has arrived. And the very first thing that Jesus does is the cleansing of the temple. There are spot flashes of temper in Jesus in the gospels. At Peter – “get behind me Satan”. At James and John who had asked for fire from heaven – “he turns and rebukes them.” But this is the one time where Jesus let’s go. Flipping tables, scattering the coins, chasing out those selling animals. “You have turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves.”

You can argue about where they set up – stealing the court of the gentiles and probably part of the court of the women. Not allowing a place for prayer for either. You can argue about how the exchange was crooked. They would first have to trade that denarius with Caesar’s image for one lacking it, and then buy the animals getting gouged twice. You’d almost think you were at a major league ballpack. There are lots of things to call out, but Jesus’ action really is the maximalist. This is a house of prayer. These are the things of God. Get the rest out.

But anyway, it doesn’t take them long to get set back up. They are back running the next day at the latest. And those who run the temple are furious – “On whose authority they spit at Jesus.” Because Jesus has taken up space teaching in the temple and he takes on all comers. Eventually prophesying against the temple itself. It is all part of Jesus’ example of rendering until the Father…rendering unto God. And his temple residence ends with a couple of pictures of rendering unto God. Jesus is teaching while watching people come and put money in the temple treasury. And he spots the widow and her two mites – two copper coins – pennies were always copper. And he points her out. “This widow put in more than all the rest…she gave everything she had.” And then he retires back out to Bethany and at dinner another woman comes up and pours an entire jar of “expensive ointment” on him. The eyewitnesses all tell the details a little different, but the fundamental story is the same. The perfume was worth about a year’s wages and she just dumps it on Jesus. And everyone, including the disciples, are angry. “Why this waste?” But Jesus defends her “She has done a beautiful thing…wherever the gospel is told, what she has done will be told.”

The overall picture is that rendering to God the things that are God’s is at least partly the theocrats picture. The things of God are everything. Christ is giving his life. The widow gave everything she had. Mary goes into extravagance with the nard, in one telling using her hair as the towel for Jesus’ feet.

But before everyone signs up for the next Crusade, just saying that it is all God’s doesn’t give Caesar his due. Yes, everything is God’s, but Jesus is also clear that Caesar has a legitimate claim. When Jesus is asked about any tax, he might pay it by finding the coins in a fish’s mouth, but he pays it. When Peter tries to stop the arrest of Jesus, he is told to put away the sword. When Pilate incredulously gasps “do you not realize I have the authority to release or kill you?” Jesus doesn’t deny the authority, merely caveats it that “you would not have it if My Father had not given it.” Through all the kangaroo courts, Jesus accepts their authority. The Son of Man goes uncomplaining forth. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He walked through crowds that wanted to kill him before. But he rendered his life to Caesar.

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars. You are 100% the subject of the realm. The liberal might complain that it is citizen, but that is only the nice face, if you are part of “our democracy”. Regardless, there is a duty to render to Caesar. Up to your life. At the same time, there is a duty to render to God. You are 100% God’s. The domestication that thinks this is easy. Just draw the line here between the two. Of course that person never sees the state constantly redrawing that line demanding more. The radical that would deny one or the other duty. Of course the radical typically assumes that they are God on earth. Both don’t get it. And unless you have 200% of yourself to render.

**Christology**

What then is the answer? The ultimate answer is that it will not always be this way. Jesus’ Kingdom is not of this world, and this world is passing away. Come quickly Jesus.

This is also where Luther’s “Sin Boldly” quote really applies. In ourselves we are not enough. But Christ was the worthy sacrifice and has paid for all our sin. When we fail to render properly, which will we, Christ has done it for us. And the day is coming when Caesar’s claims are null and void. When every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord of Lords.

That isn’t going to be here in this old realm. Whatever utopian scheme you’ve got to satisfy the demands, it won’t work. Whatever romantic notion, most of those just end up in the gulags. The only thing that works is the blood of Christ and the Last Day.

**Moral**

Until then? Sin Boldly. Render to Caesar the things that are his, and to God the things that are his. Do this cognizant that only one of those is the judge of the living and the dead. Only one of those can throw you body and soul into hell. Also cognizant that only one is truly merciful. Cognizant that there is nothing that you can exchange for your own soul. That Christ has already purchased you.

I think there is a reason that when things get serious the biblical wording moves from sacrifice or life or other high flowery things to the low monetary realm – render, exchange, purchase. There is a reason that Jesus calls out the widow’s mites, and the disciples get mad over a year’s wages poured out. A reason that Jesus talks of exchange. Because for most of us, even in bad places, we aren’t risking martyrdom. It is where we put our money that our life is.

The claim of Caesar is usually satisfied by giving him his taxes. Although there are those present who have been drafted. They gave more. But for most of us where we figure out Caesar and God is in how we handle our money. In what do we trust? Look at our personal spending. Jesus’ two examples are the two women – one who gave everything and the other who extravagantly did something beautiful. In whom did they trust? Where did they find their life?

If you really want to look in the mirror, see where your money goes.

**Eschatological**

Another of Jesus’ tricky statements that they marveled at was also in this same vein. “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings…because you can’t serve two masters.”

Recognize that today you are under two kingdoms, but only one of these lasts. And how we used the talents, how we rendered to the Kingdoms, is a sign of which is our true LORD.