

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

OCTOBER 22, 2023



CITIZENSHIP

why it isn't really the question

by Drew Downs

In the gospels, when Jesus is asked if it is lawful for a Hebrew to pay taxes to Rome, he doesn't say yes or no. It's a trick question. And yet we want to know. Not as Pharisees trying to trick him, but as faithful people wanting the last word. This is a bit like a four year-old asking if we're there yet. When we say "No, it'll be three more hours," do they actually comprehend? No. They will assuredly ask the question again in ten minutes. The question itself is the problem.

They are asking a fundamentally different question about citizenship. Their nation is occupied by an empire. They aren't citizens. But we also know there is another question here. About citizenship in the Kin-dom of Heaven *over* the kingdoms of earth. Later Christians will teach us to go along to get along. But Jesus avoids offering that advice himself. His point seems to say that we can't *truly* honor dual citizenship. Everything belongs to God.

ORDINARY TIME

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Praying for the Holy Land

Last weekend, over a thousand people were brutally murdered in Israel. Over the ensuing week, thousands more were brutally murdered in Gaza in retaliation. As people of faith, our usual response to all acts of violence and discord is prayer. We begin by praying for peace. We then struggle what to do next. How to feel. Or even how to think about it (other than stuckness and sadness).

Let us then remember *how* we pray. Jesus's disciples asked him to teach them to pray. And Jesus said *when* you pray, pray this: and shared with them what we call The Lord's Prayer. They wanted instructions and Jesus trusted that they could simply do it. There are no instructions here. No proper way. It isn't something you need training in. Nothing to be embarrassed about. *When you pray*, he says.

The point isn't how (or when or that or...) it is **what**. We pray for **God's will**. For the Kin-dom of God to replace the kingdoms of earth. That everyone is fed their daily allotment, **so none go hungry**. Forgive us of our debts as **we forgive those indebted to us**. Protect us from evil. And align everything to God as we are so aligned.

May our prayers for the Holy Land be like our prayers for ourselves. To bring an end to violence and bring true peace. To bring an end to starvation and bring sharing of resources so all may be fed. An end to economic exploitation and true freedom for all in the region. Make earth look identical to heaven. That is our prayer. Making Shalom.

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

2023

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 24A

October 22, 2023

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

ORDINARY TIME

Reflection

Have you ever been complemented by someone you know for fact actually hates you? Tell me, is your first thought “Maybe they *aren’t* trying to trick me *this time*”? And when you see Lucy hold the football, don’t you try to use telepathy to convince Charlie Brown not to run and kick it?

We know that when someone wants to humiliate us that maybe we take that into consideration. And yet, I think, when it comes to Jesus, we also think “Well, he’s better than I am. He must trust anyway.” As if trusting the untrustworthy is the right thing.

The question the Pharisees’ disciples ask Jesus is a trap. It isn’t an honest question. They aren’t looking for a real answer. This isn’t a moment to discuss the relationship of church to state. They are trying to get Jesus arrested or humiliated.

So why do we insist on answering *this one*? Something about this question speaks to our own confusions and suspicions. About both our religious faith and how we organize society in governments. In short, we want Jesus’s response to be the word on the matters of church and state. And when he gives the impression of separation of powers, we feel let off the proverbial hook.

Of course, the question wasn’t about governments and powers, it was, again, about getting Jesus arrested or humiliated by his response. There is no **right** way to answer it – that’s the trap. And Jesus, for his part, slips out of the trap, first with a non-answer. Then with a reorientation of the question.

By directed their attention to a coin that these people shouldn’t have on their person, Jesus springs the trap on them. And by directing our focus to giving to God what is God’s, Jesus guides us to remember that everything is God’s. We’re the ones trying to pretend that money can be separate from church and state.

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