

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Then he said to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”

My doctor father, the one who is my advisor for my dissertation, has a saying sometimes when someone asks him question. The person will ask him a question and Dr. Kolb will respond with, “why do you want to know?” He does that not to be snarky or to frustrate the person asking but because he can tell the question being asked is not really the real question.

Today in the Gospel reading, Jesus is asked a question by the Pharisees. This is the first of three questions in this chapter of Matthew’s Gospel the Jewish leaders ask him. Here it’s the Pharisee, by way of the Herodians, after this reading in verses 22–33, it’s the Sadducees. Following that in 34–40, it’s the Pharisees again after they heard the Sadducees, their rivals, were silenced by Jesus but lo and behold he does this to them as well, again, and finally the chapter ends with Jesus asking them a question about who the Christ is and St. Matthew writes, “And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”

The text tells you today why all these questions were being asked, “Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.” This is not long after the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday and during Holy Week. The Pharisees plotted together to find a way to try and trap Jesus in what he says so they could try to use his own words against him in some fashion. This is nothing new in Matthew’s Gospel as earlier in Matthew 12:14, it is written, “But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.”

Now before getting any further in this text, it’s warranted for you to pause and think about what’s going on here and not lose sight of the forest for the sake of the trees. These men are trying trap or trick Jesus. Before going on to what happens next you should already know how that is going to end for them. They are trying to entangle God in the flesh.

So, the Pharisees set out to do their dirty work and used Herodians, who were sympathetic to Roman rule, to ask this question of Jesus. “And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’” The stage is set, and it appears to be a trap. Say “no,” it’s not lawful to pay taxes and you undermine Rome. Say, “yes” and you appear to think that the Jewish rulers and people should submit to their Gentile rulers. It appears to be a lose-lose, situation.

Now, Jesus doesn’t respond like Dr. Kolb, my doctor father, because Jesus can see through their intent and hearts. He knows what this is all about and why they are asking this question. He knows the “why do you want to know” already behind their words. “But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’”

The question is turned around onto them. He’s not going to play their game. Now they are put into the hot seat and asked to give answer. The thing about them, the Herodians, however, is they are not God in the flesh. They answer Jesus with “Caesar’s” image in the coin. That’s a true statement. They are left, then, with what Jesus said, “Then he said to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”

Martin Luther preached on this text and summarized well this whole encounter. Here are a few highlights from what Luther preached, “*That is what happens to those who want to deceive and mock God: they mock and make*

fools of themselves. Here they falsely seek a teacher of the truth, whom they find in Him, though He is not what they thought. He meets them with the truth and hits them over the head with it, so that they reel back. . .

“Now,” they think, “we surely have Him trapped. If He says yes, then we have Him guilty of sacrilege or heresy and of being an apostate Jew who teaches against Moses and the prophets. If, however, He says no, then we have Herod’s servants right here. If He falls into their hands, then it is over for Him; if, however, He falls into the hands of the mob, then He must die. He must fall into their hands, for there is no other way of answering than yes or no, and none other than these two peoples, the Gentiles or the Jews.” Was that not contrived shrewdly enough? Who could get past this, when both sides are lined with spears? If they had been assailed with such a question, they themselves would not have known how to get out of it.

However, there is a different wisdom here of which they did not know and of which they were unaware, which is called “the wisdom of God.” He takes the spears and prongs out of their mouth, turns them around, stabs them with both, and gives neither yes nor no as an answer, but forces them to answer and condemn themselves. He truly is a Master, as they called Him, and He demonstrates that He can answer their slippery question so that they themselves have to run against His spears and be taken, just as they tried to take Him.” Thus preached Luther.

So, what does this all mean? God cannot be mocked. The Jewish leaders couldn’t do it. The enemies of Christ through the ages couldn’t do it. You can’t do it. “For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. ‘I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. I have counsel and sound wisdom; I have insight; I have strength.’”

As you hear this all today God calls you to examine your hearts. He calls you to seek the wisdom of God and give to God the things that are God’s. What are the things of God? Repent and believe the Gospel. The one who stood before them and so recently had ridden through Jerusalem on a donkey is none other than God in the flesh. The Kingdom of God had come and was in their midst and he is here now.

You see the thing is all of this is how God is teaching you as his people, as Christians, to go to your Lord in a spirit of humility, you go to him in repentance and faith. You go to him to listen not trap. You go to him to confess not deny or rationalized. A prideful and arrogant spirit goes to Jesus with the goal either to trap him or thinks he is higher than the Lord and the Lord is his servant who can be manipulated to suit his own whims and desires. God tells you, however, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you [he] will not despise.”

It is also warranted to address what Jesus says in answering their question. The temptation is also there for you, especially with what’s happening in our country this coming Tuesday, to rend to Caesar the things that are God’s and to God the things that are Caesar’s. Temporal authorities come and go and are rightfully due what is to be owed to them, but temporal authorities are not God. This world, this country, is not eternal and one day will come to an end. Likewise, God is not a temporal authority. The Kingdom of God is not of this world and is an eternal Kingdom. His Kingdom is also not a republic or a democracy, it’s a Kingdom after all and Kingdoms have a King.

Where you stand in all of this is as a Christian. You pray for God’s wisdom and seek to live according to his word. Where God’s word and the Christian faith are attacked or sought to be rejected or undermined, you owe to God what is owed to him. Even if something might have the guise of being a “political issue” if God’s word has spoken on it, it’s not a political issue. I was recently in St. Louis at the seminary and one of the professors was talking to me about filling in at a local congregation. There is an amendment on the ballot in Missouri to allow abortion even up to birth, along with issues pertaining to transgender ideology, and other things. This

professor, who teaches preaching at the seminary, was speaking against this amendment on Sunday morning as it related to the reading. Just because it is in the public limelight, it was deemed by some in the congregation as “too political.” The wisdom of God, however, reveals this is not and something that God’s people are required in the 5th Commandment to defend life and not willing be party to and approve the killing of children in the womb along with the other issues that violate who we are as God’s creature created to be either a man or woman. This professor rightly was instructing them about what is due God and what is due Caesar. Rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s does not mean that God and his word are rejected or that Caesar silences God and his word. You know this well with something like the “value them both” issue that was on the ballot a little while ago as well.

As I was literally writing this sermon the other day, I received an email President Harrison, the president of the LCMS, sent out to the whole Synod. In that email he urged God’s people to vote as citizens of this country and as citizens of God’s Kingdom. The title of the email was, “Christians are encouraged to pray, vote according to God’s Word.” President Harrison said in the email, “vote according to God’s Word. You do not leave your beliefs behind you when you enter the voting booth. You may enter the booth by yourself, but you are not alone. The God who has redeemed you, who sanctifies you, who has made you in His image and is working to complete this work in you, enters that booth with you. What does this mean? It means that when you vote, you must vote for the good of your neighbor. The LCMS does not align itself with any particular party or endorse any political candidate. But some things need to be said: Some issues have clear biblical mandates. We stand for the protection of life from conception to death. We stand for the protection of children from the predations of the LGBTQ+ agenda. As God’s people, we seek to protect the right to freely exercise our beliefs and practices in this great country.

Many other issues are also on the table. Workers should be paid fairly. Citizens — across the board — should not be unfairly taxed. The government should wield the power of the sword fairly and for the good of all. We should consider these issues and make the decision that best serves our neighbor, first and foremost. And Jesus, our Good Samaritan, has something to say about serving your neighbor in need (Luke 10:25–37).

It is not a violation of Lutheran teaching on the Two Kingdoms to encourage Christians to this task of voting. God calls His people to be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13–14). In our time, this includes voting for the good of our neighbor.”

You see we don’t presume to approach God in a spirit that thinks we can somehow dictate to God our idea of what is right or wrong nor we don’t approach God to justify ourselves or to somehow silence his voice. There are things that do belong to Caesar such as the amount of taxes, tariffs, what the role of the country should be in foreign policy, and other issues that Christians can and disagree on and still be of the same spirit. Yet this is all not at the expense of the things that are God’s. Earthly rulers are servants of God, the Bible teaches in Romans 13, not the other way around.

As a baptized child of God who has been redeemed by the Christ, called, and gathered into the Church by the Holy Spirit, you are one who hears all this today and sees your Lord who has shown you mercy. You have a place in the eternal Kingdom even as you now are in the Church on this side of glory. Approaching Christ in faith is approaching him as a righteous one who, when he looks at you, doesn’t look at you and see the malice in your heart but rather has compassion on you as only, he can do. He hears and answers your prayers, and he speaks to you as the Good Shepherd, and you are his sheep who know his voice and follow him. He says in those words of the Introit today, “I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.”

The three traps set by the people in the chapter of Matthew’s Gospel were an exercise in futility but that’s par for the course with sin and unbelief, they are foolish and a fool’s errand. Dear Christians, most especially be at

23rd Sunday after Trinity—November 3, 2024

peace this day and know to whom you belong and what this means. Your sin is forgiven; you belong to Christ. No matter what comes your way in this life be it good or bad, joy or sorrow, Christ has redeemed you and you are his through all of this as you go through this world. Even as you face death, you face it as the victor who has eternal life amid death. This is all yours as his own dear child and together as his people, the Church.

Rejoice this day and be glad in the Lord. Cast your cares and burdens onto him. Find rest in the Lord who was not overcome by those who wanted to entrap him but was and is faithful in all things and took upon himself your sin. Be joyful and be comforted by the Lord God who things are his and he gives them to you now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.