

Homily: Proper 24, Year A; Rev. Robert Petite D.Min. Church of the Ascension'. X Sunday, October 18, 2020

During my years as a Pastoral educator and training hospital chaplains, I've spent a lot of time helping students engage in pastoral conversations. One of the characteristics of those pastoral conversation is the skill of asking patients "open questions", questions for which there are a multitude of answers.

For example, a student chaplain might ask the patient "What has it been like for you to be in the hospital". This kind of open question invites the patient to share their experience of being a hospital patient.

In this way the chaplain seeks to create an open space for the patient to share their experience. The chaplain wants to open up the space for the chaplain and patient to form a pastoral alliance, as a means of supporting the patient during their stay in the hospital.

An example of a CLOSED question would be, "*Do you find it difficult to be in the hospital?*" This question has a "yes" or "no", or a "this" or "that" kind of answer. Closed questions only have one answer. Closed questions do not really help to further the development of a pastoral relationship, but rather tend to shut conversations down. (*Pause*)

At the heart of this morning's Gospel reading is a closed question, a question that is meant to limit and restrict the conversation. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Those who ask such a question do not really want to know much about what Jesus really thinks about taxation. Their conversation with him is meant to restrict rather than to enlarge options and is essentially an exercise in power and control.

You see, by this time in Matthew's Gospel, we are at the point in the ministry of Jesus where things are getting extremely difficult. The religious and political authorities want to exert control over Jesus. Prior to today's reading, Jesus entered Jerusalem and was greeted by adoring crowds and thus he became a potential for political unrest. He also entered the Temple and overthrow the tables of the moneychangers, creating religious havoc.

In response to this political and religious challenge, two groups – the Herodians, Jews who were in league with the Roman authorities, and the Pharisees, the keepers of the Temple, who normally wanted nothing to do with one another, begin working to limit Jesus' authority. They set a trap for him. This trap involves asking a closed question, a "yes" or "no" question that will get Jesus in trouble with the authorities no matter how he answers it. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

In response to this question, Jesus asks to see the coin. Then Jesus says to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperors." 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." Jesus skillfully avoids the trap in his answer, but in so doing seems to settle upon an interesting and complex dichotomy.

At face value, Jesus' answer seems to support the separation of church and state, that we each have a civic responsibility and a religious responsibility, and the two are entirely separate. I think to understand Jesus' statement as meaning anything like this would be a mistake.

The relationship between politics and religion in Israel was a very big deal. To pay taxes was to be a part of the state, to refrain from paying taxes was a refusal to be a part of the state. What do observant Jews do about this dilemma, and about this pagan power that controlled everything? Does paying taxes sanction that power? This was precisely the dilemma of many devout Christians in Germany prior to World War II?

It is important for us to realize that the world in which Jesus lived had absolutely no concept of a separation between political and religious life. The culture in which Jesus lived was nothing like our own. For the devout Jew the culture was ONE - everything was God's; nothing belonged to the Emperor. Indeed, for the Herodians and the Pharisees, to even possess a Roman coin with an *image* of Caesar on it, was an indication they had already broken the commandments against worshiping other gods and graven images. For any observant Jew, to even possess the coin was to carry a pagan god in your pocket.

Still, Jesus' answer raises significant questions not only for the devout Jew of his time, but for us as well. What really does belong to Caesar, and what belongs to God?

In allowing some separation between church and state, Jesus was no doubt prepared to pay taxes and to invite his followers to do the same, as succeeding Christians down through the centuries certainly did. However, there may be times when an obedient response to the state is not possible, and a protest is required. There were after all, times when Jesus thought that the right response was to overturn tables and drive out money changers. In our time we have the vote and the first amendment as a means of protest.

Jesus' question is as important for us, as it was for the people of his time. Are we meant to separate our call to live the Christian Way from our call to live out our political and civic responsibilities? Are we meant to establish a dual responsibility to God on the one hand, and to our country on the other?

These questions become all the more urgent in an election season. Elizabeth Dais of the New York Times speculates that the current election "has become a referendum on the soul of the nation", and suggests that "the outcome hinges in part on spiritual and philosophical questions that transcend politics: She wonders "what, exactly, is the soul of the nation? What is the state of it? And what would it mean to save it". These are questions only too familiar to the citizens of Jesus' time.

To a faithful and observant Jew of the time, everything is God's; nothing is the Emperor's. And calling the Emperor "God" is blasphemy. How can a Jew be faithful and observant and also stay alive under Roman rule?

You can see the problem for the religious person in Jesus' time, and for us as well, although nowhere near as dangerous a problem to our personal survival or religious integrity.

This is the kind of stress people of faith feel as we find ourselves a part of a complex political milieu. It certainly makes life interesting.

I have been feeling a lot of stress as a Christian in this fraught political environment. The phrase that comes to mind from the scriptures is the text about “wresting against principalities and powers in high places”.

The desire to make the tension go away, to solve it, is understandable. But I sometimes wonder, when I’m rested and thinking more clearly, and less afraid, if that desire is actually the enemy of being true to our Christian calling in our time.

We live in a broken world, a fallen world, but none the less, a world created by God. We will find much that is true, good and beautiful in this world, but we will not find perfection, neither in political outcomes, nor in human behavior. I believe it is the Christian calling to live in this tension, to live in it with integrity and with courage.

I am reminded of this tension when I recite the Daily Office and pray the Suffrages.

V. Lord, keep this nation under your care;	R. And guide us in the way of justice and truth.
V. Let your way be known upon earth;	R. Your saving health among all nations.
V. Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;	R. Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

These prayers testify to the tension we all live in, but also the Christian duty to invoke God’s presence and action upon the times in which we live.

I want to return finally to the principle of asking open questions. Often, in the Scriptures, we are invited to identify not only with Jesus, but also with the protagonists in the Gospels. And so, we are to see ourselves in the persons of the Herodians and the Pharisees as well and see our own propensity to ask closed questions as we engage those who differ from us politically and religiously.

The Christian congregation, especially an Episcopal congregation, is a rare gathering these days, in that it is one of the few gatherings of people who often differ politically and religiously from one another. When we engage those who differ from us, it is always helpful to remember that all of us, both liberal and conservative, are made in the image of God. This central teaching of our faith is meant to aid us in appreciating our divine humanity, and to see one another more clearly.

And so, as we engage one another, open questions are the order of the day, if we hope to form the kind of human and religious communities the Gospels continually calls us into. Questions like “Could you tell me more about your political beliefs?” or “Would you be open to sharing more about your religious practices”, rather than “Don’t you think our political representative is wrong about such and such?” This practice does not mean we should not participate in energetic conversations, but that forming caring, respectful, and genuine relationships, are a prerequisite to those conversations. I think if we were to become more aware of our sharing in the divine image, we might approach those who differ from us, by asking the kinds of questions that invite us into relationship.