



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A-October 18th 2020

***Readings: Isaiah 45: 1, 4-6, Psalm 95, 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5,
Matthew 22: 15-21***

Light years ago, and in a former incarnation I was invited to speak at a local Rotary meeting in my old parish. 'Any particular subject you would like?', I enquired. My host responded simply that they were never allowed to talk about religion, sex or politics. Can you think of any better recipe for a profoundly dull evening?

Well, relax, there is no sex in this homily but we can't avoid the central encounter in the Gospel where Jesus is questioned, essentially, on the relation between religion and politics.

Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not? A very pressing question of the time because to affirm our dues to the occupying power would be to accept the sovereignty of a pagan power. To reject the fiscal contract with the state would be to incite rebellion and revolution and incur the terrifying wrath of the Roman war machine. Not an easy circle to square.

Jesus' answer is one of the most frequently quoted of His sayings,

'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's'

It is often advanced as a justification for the separation of 'church and state' and the non-interference of religious belief with the political realm. Jesus' hearers would not have heard it thus.

The Jewish people had long ago demanded a king so that they could be 'like everyone else' and not a Theocracy, governed by God. This had produced, to put it mildly, a very mixed outcome. What they were clear about was that, in the end, secular power had to pay homage to divine power. There is an hierarchy of authority. God comes first.

So, while Jesus' apparent ambiguity enables the believer to live in peace where possible with the secular regime, it does not in any way equate the created with the Creator. Man is temporary and fallen. God is eternal and true.

At the time, of course, Rome had begun that long and ludicrous process of divinising its emperors. The departed rulers became divine and entered the pantheon of pagan godlets.

Perhaps the most amusing story of this obsession with imperial apotheosis is that of Vespasian, the eventual successor of the suicidal Nero after the famous year of the four emperors (69AD). Once the official charged with cleaning the Roman toilets, Vespasian had emerged, after a good campaign in Britain (including seizing our tin mines), a massive campaign to suppress the Jewish Revolt (his son Titus finished it off 70AD) he became Emperor. Ten years later, as he lay dying, Suetonius records him as saying, 'Vae, puto deus fio' – Dear me, I think I am becoming a god'

This is a rather different theology., a different hierarchy of values.

For the follower of Jesus there is no contest between the values of the secular state and the sovereignty of God. We are contracted to the

State, wherever possible, to pay our dues and follow our duties. What we can never be contracted to do is to acquiesce in the subjugation of the Church of God to the hostile state. And there will be times when we have to stand up to tyranny. This is not usually a 'party' matter but one of fundamental principle. So, for example, in Germany in 1934, the confessing Christian movement issued the Barmen Declaration rejecting Deutsche Christen, a movement cheerfully incorporating Nazism into the fabric of the evangelical churches. In so doing the 'Confessing Church' was, peacefully and at great personal cost, replicating the ancient stand of the Maccabees whose rejection of the secularising tyranny of the Seleucid emperors led to a great revolt.

For a follower of Jesus what he believes cannot be separated from what he does or how he conducts himself in the political arena of which we are all a part. Our participation in the *polis, the life of the earthly city*, cannot be divorced from our knowledge of and final participation in the Heavenly City. Political action is the direct result of conviction, of belief. A man who tells you that his faith has no bearing on his action is being dishonest or he is not a man of faith at all.

Faith may be privately practised but it always has public consequence. It is why secular tyrannies always hate the confessing Church.

At the trial of Jesus, Pontius Pilate, parades Our Lord and enquires why they are wanting to kill their 'king'.

The Beloved Disciple records the shattering reply of the religious establishment

'We have no king but Caesar'. (John 19v15)

The day we join that unholy chorus is the day when we have fatally denied the sovereignty of God.

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's
but unto God the things that are God's.

A Christian does not seek war with the state, but he will not entertain
tyranny.