



In this morning's gospel reading we hear an attempt by the religious leaders to trap Jesus into saying something that will get him into trouble with the Roman authorities, and probably with the people as well. Paying taxes may be unpopular today but in Jesus time it was much more so. Taxes were collected by unscrupulous

tax collectors who made their living by the tax they pocketed, and the money they passed on went to support the Roman emperor and the empire not to building roads or to social services. Taxes were so unpopular that tax collectors were considered the lowest of the low.

The Roman Emperors often expected to be worshiped by their subjects, and though they allowed the Jews to practice their own ancient religion, if it seemed to be going against the Emperor there would be a harsh crackdown.

So this question was intended to put Jesus between a rock and hard place. If he agreed that it was lawful under Jewish law to pay taxes to the emperor, he would lose a lot of support from the common people AND he could be accused of suggesting that it was lawful to worship the emperor. On the other hand, if he said it was **not** lawful that would be rebellion against Caesar and would be a reason for the Romans to get involved.

But he does neither. In that rather slippery way Jesus has of answering a question with a question, he points out that Caesar is the ruler of the political and financial system ; after all, it's his head on the coin. And then he says "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" which is a very oblique statement.

Because how do we know what is the emperor's and what is God's?

Today it is even less easy to see what is the emperor's because we live in a nation that purposely did away with emperors, yet continues to build empire. We live in a society that purports to be equal and fair yet favors those who have money and those with personal ties to the rich the most influence. Advertising, both overt and subtle, conditions us to see in particular ways so the emperor is no longer someone out there but, like the phantom of the opera, is in our minds.

And because God is the Creator of everything, and the Christ is in all of creation, there actually isn't anything which is not God's. We are the stewards of creation. We are the stewards of the talents, abilities and connections that we have been given. So how can we give unto God that which is God's when it's all God's anyway?

God has a purpose. I'm not so sure that God has a plan in the sense of something carefully worked out in advance which we should be following. A plan in that sense would be doomed to failure by our own freedom to make choices. I sometimes think that God is painting a picture but the pigment she is using has a mind of its own, so it keeps moving and God keeps moving in an interactive dance. But God does have a very clear sense of how the picture is going to look. That is God's purpose.

When we dedicate everything - money, energy, influence, relationships to furthering God's purpose, then we are Giving unto God' that which is God's. God's purpose is the flourishing of all creation. God's purpose is that we humans should live as children of the all-compassionate God, giving and forgiving.

But the emperor of this world has different plans. Here are some of today's headlines:

"Conservatives look for revenge in Mississippi", "Why has the EPA shifted on toxic chemicals?" "O'Reilly settled new harassment claims, then Fox renewed his contract". These are not headlines of humanity moving with the peaceful purpose of God. These are headlines that make

us either want to turn off and just live our own little lives, or which make us anxious.

Anxiety and fear are useful tools for emperors. They keep us paralyzed in our minds and help us to lose sight of God's purpose.

Imagine that every morning we are given 20 units of energy for living the day in accordance with God's purpose, but we spend 7 of those holding on to grudges and regrets from the past; then we spend another 8 worrying about the future. That's 15 out of our 20 units used up. We have every little energy left for living today, and with so little energy it's not surprising that we don't have what it takes to resist the emperor in our minds let alone in our political system.

When this happens, we are giving Caesar that which is God's.

God's purpose is for us to allow the past to be the past, forgiving ourselves and forgiving others for the mistakes and the hurts and the oppression. God's purpose is for us to put the future into God's hands. We can't change it by worrying and being anxious. God's purpose is for us to be peacemakers and reconcilers, refusing to be coerced or encouraged into creating more anger and more enmity.

God's purpose is for us all to be in as close relationship with Godself as Moses was in that beautiful passage we heard in the first reading. Moses asks to see God,

“Show me your glory, I pray.” And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but

my face shall not be seen.”

Isn't that a tender and intimate moment? Moses longs to see God's face but it is too glorious for him to be able to see it and live, so God covers him with his hand while he passes by and then lifts his hand so that Moses may see God's back.

God longs to cover each one of us with God's hand and then allow us just as much of a glimpse of her glory as we can bear.

Giving to God that which is God's means opening ourselves to that possibility – opening ourselves to receive God's presence directly – making the time to allow God to show us whatever aspect of Godself she chooses.

That is “giving to God the things that are God's”, but what about “Giving therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's?” In the sense that I'm using it here, there is nothing that rightfully belongs to the emperor.

So how do we deal with the emperor who is in our minds and who demands regular payment?

I am sure you have heard this teaching story;

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

So which are you going to feed? The evil wolf of the emperor or the good wolf of God?