

Sunday, October 24, 2011
Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (Special Propers)
Grace Church, Elmira
The Rev'd Fr. Donald W. Matthews+

In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Not all that long ago I was watching a wonderful classic movie where there was a scene with Gary Cooper seated on a bleak hillside, the wind stirring up the leaves all about him (probably not all that different than this morning, in fact), with a small battered Bible in his lap. In this moment in his life he was struggling with his duty to God and to his country. He was contemplating joining the army in World War I which, in the course of things, would necessitate killing another human being. Whether or not the scene is strictly a fiction out of Hollywood, it spelled out in a powerful way the struggle he was experiencing and the ultimate answer to his question. There was a sudden gust of wind and the pages of his Bible began to flutter rapidly and stopped suddenly at a passage in the Scriptures — the very passage of today's Gospel, "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's.*" He received the answer to his struggle in that brief moment and rest is the history of the great hero of World War I we know as **Sergeant York**.

Oddly enough, this method of discerning the will of God — that is, by flipping over the pages of the Bible and stopping after three turns and pointing to a given passage (sometimes referred to as "bible bingo") has been used by some for precisely that purpose. I know of a very good celibate clergyman friend of mine who tried this once. After three turns, with his eyes closed, he pointed and this passage from blessed Saint Paul leaped off the page at him: "Husbands love your wives." Needless to say, he hasn't tried it since!

I tell this little tale all by way of saying that it is not always easy for any of us — no matter how Godly and spiritual we may be — to know God's will for us at any given moment in time. Using such tactics aren't much help in the long run — except, perhaps, as a fun way of beginning your daily meditations with Scripture from time to time. It really must be said, however, that in reality, the "things of God" and the "things of Caesar's" are not really that distinct, ultimately, from the will of God in my humble opinion.

While this morning's passage resolved Sergeant York's life decision, I suspect that Jesus Christ was referring to the obligations to God and to Caesar as separate considerations only because He was attempting to show those hypocrites that when it came down to the issues He was confronted with, there were priorities. He was not canceling out the ultimate connection between the two, nor should we. Remember, it is our Lord who tells us to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" in the same breath! As social beings we must see the relationship between the social order, that is, the temporal power of Caesar, as well as the Kingdom of God, which begins for each of us here and now.

If someone does not believe in a supreme being, or personal accountability for one's actions, or lack of action, which affects others, then it is perfectly natural and sensible to seek only the "things which are Caesar's." But there are also those who realize that which belongs to Caesar is really on loan to them from God. So if we believe in God, then it is important for us be

concerned about the things which are also Caesar's in our world. I hope that is making sense here. What I am saying is that concern about our society, how people are treated, how truth and justice are preached and practiced, how we are taxed, what we are taxed for, what priority is given to war and conflict as a solution to national problems and prestige and to the care of those in need and how those whom we empower by our votes to represent us are not separate issues at all.

It is hard to see how we can serve God without being concerned about the demands, needs and obligations of the "things of Caesar." It is Jesus who is the answer here. Christ is the link that brings these two dynamics of our lives together — enfleshing, if you will, the temporal and the spiritual — or bringing together the "two cities of God," as Saint Augustine of Hippo would write. They were drawn through Christ into the one coin of the realm — the realm of God's Kingdom. So we, as His followers, have the obligation of reaching out to others in our concern here and throughout the world for today and tomorrow's generations — to manifest in concrete ways that the "things of Caesar" are also God's. While our faith does not give all the answers to political and social problems, it does stand as a beacon of hope and promise — giving direction to principles and moral demands in this world. Our political thinking and actions need to be informed by Christ's demand for justice, truth and service. That is, rendering both to Caesar and to God. It is much too important that we remember that our faith is not simply a place of consolation and temporary escape from the cold realities of this world and do not wish to hear of Caesar's world. No, my friends, this remains the world in which we are immersed everyday. As the poet Louis Newman put it, "I sought to hear the voice of God and climbed the highest steeple; but God declared go down again, I dwell among my people."

Imagine that moment — Jesus asks the Pharisees to produce a denarius — the coin minted with the words: *Tiberius Casesar Divi Augustus Pontifex Maximus* or "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." By doing so, Jesus forces them and us to admit that we are all caught between the forces of two worlds. The coin that our Lord held in His hand — that He offers to us to hand on to others with both the heads and tails, joys and sorrows, death and life, darkness and light, consolations and obligations — is in our hands. ONE COIN is the admission price to the kingdom which is here and yet to be, my friends. One coin

We are meant to enter this world as He did — as signs of hope and trust and joy and ultimately love — and not seek to escape from the crosses it may entail. "Render unto Caesar the things that are his," indeed, and by that render unto God those that are God's, which is everything and everyone, including Caesar himself.

There is always then the danger of seeing only the here and now — Caesar's world — one side of the coin of the "realm," as though it were separated from the things of God. Likewise however there is the danger of seeing only the "things of God — the other side of the coin of the "realm," God's Kingdom, as separate from the world. There is not, nor should there be, any such false dichotomy.

It just may be a struggle for us at times to reconcile the two, but in truth, they both — the things of God's and the things of Caesar's — comprise as one the coin of the choices of all our life. May we choose wisely.