

St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

Timonium, Maryland

The Twenty Fourth Sunday After Trinity, November 18th, 2007

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The incident related in today's Communion Gospel took place only a couple of days after Palm Sunday when Jesus had been hailed as Messiah., by folks waving palm branches and shouting "hosanna." Within 24 hours of Jesus' arrival in the Holy City, the head honchos of the political parties sounded out his advance men – the apostles – to discover if his political agenda was compatible with their own.

Their motive, of course, was to sign Jesus up as their party's candidate for messiah in order to throw his enormous popularity behind their agendas. Judea's politicians, however, rapidly discovered Jesus wasn't an unworldly, pie-in-the sky preacher. Far from being easily manipulated, he immediately saw through their efforts to co-opt his moral authority. When they learned they couldn't make him their creature, his fate was sealed.

Today's Gospel deals with an attempt by Jerusalem's politicians to discredit and destroy Jesus. It was, in effect, a "sting" operation – a bid to entrap him into committing either blasphemy or high treason, offenses that carried the death penalty. An earlier attempt to entrap Jesus had failed and it was feared that if he wasn't discredited at this point, he would be unstoppable.

The two political parties involved in the plot were the most unlikely allies it is possible to imagine. The Pharisees and the Herodians were bitter enemies.

The Pharisees were the equivalent of the Christian Coalition. They wanted the messiah to kick out the Romans and their quislings and set up decent, godly government. The Herodians were progressives who recognized that the Roman Empire offered unparalleled opportunities for economic growth and social progress. The last thing they wanted was Judea to be ruled by fundamentalist fanatics, led by a crazed Ayatollah like the messiah.

Their bizarre alliance was forged because the two parties hated and feared Jesus far more than they hated and feared each other. Though the Pharisees conceded that on paper his claim to messiahship was compelling, but they hated him because he showed no inclination to fulfill their military agenda.

The Herodians hated Jesus because they feared exactly the opposite – that he would indeed attack the Romans, reversing half a century of social and economic progress and inviting Roman reprisals that would devastate Judea.

The plan was simplicity itself. They proposed to lure Jesus into a political debate in which they would pose a question that it was impossible for a devout Jew to answer: "Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar, or not?"

The Jews were a subject people and obliged to acknowledge the unpalatable fact by paying taxes to Rome. However, Mosaic Law decreed taxes could be paid only to God. If Jesus answered: "Yes, you should pay taxes to Rome," the Pharisees could haul him into religious court and condemn him to death because the Romans honored local religious customs.

But if Jesus answered "No, you should not pay taxes," the Herodians could then accuse him of treason and demand the Roman civil authorities execute him. It was the perfect "Heads we win, tails you lose" situation.

But things didn't turn out the way they planned. Jesus didn't answer their question immediately. Instead, he asked to see a coin in which the tax was

paid. It was the Roman Denarius or "penny" as the King James Bible describes it. Denarii were silver coins stamped with the Roman emperor's likeness.

"Whose image is this?" asked Jesus, "What does the superscription say?" "It is Caesar," came the reply. Jesus response is one of the most famous put downs in history: "Render therefore unto Caesar's the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

This answer is very much more than an example of divine debating skills. Not least, it reveals a deft grasp of the complexities of rabbinic law. It held that "wheresoever the money of any king is current, there the inhabitants acknowledge that king for their lord."

Roman coinage was the legal tender in Judea. Everyone used it, including both the Herodians and the Pharisees and this, in Jewish Law, constituted tacit acknowledgement the authority of the Roman Emperor. In throwing rabbinic law in the Pharisees' faces, Jesus demonstrated that he knew the law far better than they did.

But Jesus wasn't merely scoring points off the Pharisees. He was scoring them off the Herodians as well. "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar and unto God, the things that are God's" reminded the Herodians that Caesar demanded far more than any Jew, fanatical or moderate, could give him.

Not only did he collect taxes as king, he also demanded to be worshipped as God. In an effort to reverse the empire's moral decay, the Romans attempted to foster civic virtue by endowing the state with godlike qualities. All subjects and citizens were required to worship the state – embodied in the form of the emperor.

Jesus was reminding the Herodians that one can't worship both God and man. His point is that people to whom God has revealed his truth have no alternative but to put their duty to God ahead of their duty to the state. This is not a message that the Romans – or, indeed, any secular administration – wanted to hear. That is why, for 300 years, Christians were persecuted by the Roman civil authorities.

It is instructive that the need to do away with Jesus Christ was the one issue Jerusalem's entire political establishment could agree on. As Caiaphas, the chief priest and leader of the Saducees, Judea's third major political party, put it: It was expedient for one man to die to save the entire nation from destruction.

He made this judgment on the assumption that God shared his view of what was right, good and, above all, practical. Thus he confused the things that are God's with the things that are Caesar's. It is a failing we share today – especially when we try to exclude God from the public square.

Excluding God's views from informing public debate is, in fact, no different from co-opting God as the patron of our personal ambitions. AMEN.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. Amen.