Trinity 20A/St Luke 18/10/26

Jesus asked for a coin, a denarius, the coin used to pay the tax to Rome. He asked the Pharisees and Herodians to verify whose image was on it. "The emperor's," they said. "Very well," said Jesus, "give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). With that answer Jesus put responsibility for one's conduct back on the individual. Each one would decide how to respond. Those words still have a message for us.

The first thing Jesus does is acknowledge that there are some things citizens owe to their government. One of those things is obedience to its just laws. Obeying the law sometimes means we have to abide by restrictions on our actions for the sake of the common good. Because most of us see things only from our own point of view there are laws protecting the general welfare, and good citizens need to respect those laws, even when it is personally disliked.

Another thing a country may expect when its government is responsive to the needs of its citizens is loyalty. Loyalty can often require us to make great sacrifices. Still another thing a government such as ours ought to be able to expect of its citizens is responsible involvement in making things better. When heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis was asked why, in view of American discrimination against black people, he was happy to serve in the United States Army during World War II he responded, "Man, whatever is wrong with my country ain't nothin' Hitler can fix!" In our country, commitment to active citizenship is important.

A government also has a right to expect that its citizens will pay for the benefits they receive. For the Jews of Jesus' day, the head tax was particularly repugnant because it was paid to a foreign power. The most conservative Jews thought of themselves as a nation ruled only by God. Therefore, to pay the tax was to acknowledge the existence of another king. But Jesus points out that there are indeed earthly rulers, as we heard in our reading from Isaiah, and it is appropriate to pay for the services they provide. We benefit from public services: law and order, fire, water, education, defence, the judiciary, and social welfare. *What did the Romans ever do for us…..* That means we have obligations to our country, state, and community.

One further thing the citizens owe to the government is continuous scrutiny of its policies. We should cast an affectionate, but sharp, glance at our country. We should love it but insist on telling it all its faults.

The second thing Jesus says is "(Give) to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). Surely one of the things due to God is worship. In the story on which the play *Fiddler on the Roof* is based, Tevya the dairyman prays three times a day. He addresses God, whom he loves, with affection, irony, sympathy, reverence, impudence, and hope. Every morning at sunrise he says his longing prayers with a prayer shawl over his head and other reminders of God on his brow and arm. Worship gave Tevya his perspective. Worship is God's due, but those who do the worshiping are the beneficiaries. Another thing we owe to God is service. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," says Jesus (Matthew 25:40). Still another thing that Christians owe to God is obedience. That obedience has often led to painful conflict. During the Nazi control of Germany, many groups had to decide to whom to be obedient. Helmuth von Moltke, Silesian lawyer and leader of a group called the "Kreisau Circle", was picked up by the Gestapo for speaking out on behalf of the Geneva Convention, International

law and Christian principles. Eventually Moltke died for those principles. In his last letter to his wife before being executed, he wrote that he stood before Hitler's court not as a Protestant, not as a landowner, not as a noble, not as a Prussian, not even as a German. He stood before the court simply as a Christian and nothing else. The claims of God and the claims of Caesar are sometimes in conflict, and then we have to decide to whom we will be obedient.

One more thing that a Christian appropriately owes to God is loyalty. It would be nice if we always kept our loyalties separate and equal, like writing a cheque to the ATO to satisfy the state, and writing a cheque to the church to meet our responsibility to God. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. From the time of Jesus' ministry, Christians have been aware that they are citizens of another homeland, and that dual citizenship sometimes requires painful choices.

The third thing I want to say is that when we are faced with painful choices, we must be careful that we do not look for the easiest way of resolving the problem. One of those seemingly easier ways is to allow others to make our tough decisions. Erich Fromm was a Jewish psychoanalyst living in Berlin when the Nazis came to power. Prior to that time he had assumed that humanity was coming of age. Instead, he witnessed with horror how the German people of the '30s gave up their freedom to Hitler as eagerly as their forefathers had fought for it. Out of his inquiry in his aptly titled book *Fear of Freedom* into how this could be, came the realisation that many people find that the freedom to choose is too much of a burden to bear. They would rather escape from freedom and rush to find some authority that would decide for them and allow them to be children again or even slaves. It is a constant temptation for all of us to abdicate moral responsibility and allow the government to decide for us what conduct is moral and what is not, or whether a certain war is morally justifiable or not. It is a temptation we must resist.

It is equally dangerous to turn governmental decisions over to the religious authorities. History is littered with disasters when religious entities ry to rule the populace. Jim Jones took his religious followers to Guyana to set up a new society with himself in charge. With no one to offer a contrary opinion, the leader became unbalanced and led his people to mass suicide. The church is no better at ruling the state than the state is at dictating morality. Therefore, the decision as to what we render to Caesar and what we render to God is never something that someone else can make for us if we are to be moral men and women. Not only must we pray for wisdom to make the choice, we must pray for the courage to act upon our choice. Thomas More was Lord Chancellor of England and a friend of King Henry VIII. But when Henry divorced his first wife and married Anne Boleyn, More disapproved and indicated that he could not approve to make these actions legitimate. To cut a long story short, where he refused to swear to the Act of Succession More was arrested and charged with treason. In the play based on his life, *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt, More's daughter comes to him and urges him to swear this oath in order to save his life, for the king has sworn to take More's life if he does not swear to the Act of Succession. More responds:

"When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then, he needn't hope to find himself again..." and further on he says: "If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly. And we'd live like animals or angels in the happy land that needs no heroes. But since, in fact, we see that avarice, anger, envy, pride, sloth, lust, and stupidity commonly profit far beyond humility, chastity, fortitude, justice, and thought, and we have to choose (in order) to be human at all... why then we must stand fast a little — even at the risk of being heroes." (Robert

Bolt, A Man for All Seasons)

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." But when they are in conflict, what is due to God comes first.

Fr Robert Newton