

29th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020
TAXES, CHURCH AND STATE

Mt 22.15-21 Is 40.4-6 1Thess 1.1-5

Welcome yet to another weekend virtual Mass, as only one new coronavirus case and no deaths occurred from it, as reported in the latest figures, so we're heading in the right direction, for more freedom from the heavy lockdown we are presently in. As time has dragged on, it hasn't been easy for any of us, but at least school is back and we're hoping for gradual opening up in the broader community, including church, sooner than later.

Our thoughts, concerns and prayers are with those who have lost employment or who have had small businesses adversely affected, overseas students, refugees and asylum seekers, solo parents, as the endless list goes on. And then there are those in the front line providing medical care, putting themselves at risk for the good of others.

Patience is being tested, but when we consider the international scene, as for example in USA or UK or France and the developing world, we need to be thankful our numbers have been relatively low, as community health concerns have had priority over economics, but it's a complex balance, with considerable pain and loss to many, who need support and understanding. There are no simple solutions.

And so we gather to celebrate in spirit once more. In this Mass, I'd particularly like to remember my dear one and only aunt, Betty Hannon, who died on Friday, only 2 weeks after happily celebrating her 97th birthday. Over the last 3 years she has often come here for a stay with me and enjoyed attending Mass and meeting friendly parishioners, so thanks for being there.

On the parish website with this weekend's bulletin, I have written a letter to parish and school communities about where we seem to be at the moment, and the one certainty is that uncertainty continues at present!!

Here we are with a very topical subject, and one of life's certainties, that being tax, on which subject I always quote: ***"I like to pay taxes. With them, I buy civilization."*** Thus speaks Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, an American jurist, who was on the US Supreme Court from 1902 to 1932. Known for his pithy opinions and quotable quotes, his common sense approach to law and life make a lot of sense, as in: *"The young man knows the rules but the old man knows the exceptions"* and *"Even a dog distinguishes between being stumbled over and kicked."* What is clear is that he had a good sense of objective truth, justice and the common good, values that well fit today's Gospel message.

Tax cuts is a simplistic rallying cry, but if we want a fair go for all in society, then we need to pull our weight, in supporting essential services such as health, education and welfare, not to forget infrastructure and the like, and overseas aid, especially in times of unemployment and recession, as we face in the current local and global crisis on our precious blue planet, or 'the pale blue dot' in the universe, as astronomer Carl Sagan described Earth, photographed by spaceship Voyager I, from beyond the solar system's outer limits.

In his most recent encyclical, addressed not just to Catholics or Christians, but to the world's 7 billion+ inhabitants, ***Fratelli tutti (Sisters and Brothers All)***, Pope Francis highlights our common humanity thus: *"If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbour was born in my country or elsewhere. My own country also shares responsibility for his or her development, although it can fulfil that responsibility in a variety of ways. It can offer a generous welcome to those in urgent need, or work*

to improve living conditions in their native lands by refusing to exploit those countries or to drain them of natural resources, backing corrupt systems that hinder the dignified development of their peoples... At times, the inability to recognize equal human dignity leads the more developed regions in some countries to think that they can jettison the 'dead weight' of poorer regions and so increase their level of consumption” (Pope Francis, Fratelli tutti #125).

As Claude Mostowik MSC puts it: “*Jesus’ question to those trying to entangle him reminds us that we are all made in God’s image... Wherever that image is violated by political or ecclesial power, then we must strive to preserve God’s image in the one victimised and the one victimizing. God’s only currency.*” The cry for justice and human dignity is fundamental to our faith. Paying our taxes is part of that responsibility.

In the Gospel context today, here we have Jesus discussing a down to earth reality in the culture in which he lived. Once more, the nasties are out to get him, this time with entrapment, ‘the action of tricking someone into a crime to secure their prosecution’, which is technically illegal these days, probably not back then! But there’s certainly malice aforethought in the minds of the Pharisees, whom one might suspect had dragged along the Herodians to achieve their scheming ends.

Nothing, however, will stop these Pharisees, the religious temple police, so to speak, from pursuing Jesus, this time, the Herodians being the secular authorities, kept in favour by the state and Herod, the local ruler, for their support of Roman occupation, and thus the taxes demanded from the local people as a result.

At the same time, one has also to appreciate some of the benefits of Roman taxes, with the roads, the aqueducts for water, law and order, *Pax Romana* (peace, at least some of the time!), a degree of sanitation and public health. One can’t be totally critical of the services provided as a result, even if there was a substantial portion sent off to Rome to keep the armies going and enrich the emperor of the day and his cronies!!

For the Pharisees, there was a theological problem of idolatry, given that the penny or denarius coin Jesus asks for, had the image of the emperor imprinted, with the heretical title of ‘*Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus*’, thereby divinizing the emperor, whereas only the one God of the Jewish people was of this status. Significantly, Jesus catches them out, given that they weren’t meant to be carrying such pagan coins in the first place, but, as we all know, money speaks!

Brendan Byrne SJ states: “*Jesus takes possession of the moral high ground by setting responsibility to the civil power within the broader and higher framework of obedience to God... The later Christian sense of the separation of Church and State has its origins here, along with the recognition that believers have responsibilities in both realms that oblige in conscience before God.*”

Jesus’ riposte is simple and smart, that there is a responsibility to support the services of the state by its citizens, but that the natural presumption of faith is that all have obligations to observe their religious convictions within the secular state. There is no call to subvert the civil law, but a reminder that there needs to be a balance between faith and life in society.

john hannon 18th October 2020