

## A Coin Toss?

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Matthew 22:15-21*

“The Pharisees plotted how they might entrap him in speech.”

It sounds like presidential campaigning.

The difference, however:

as distinguished from the presidential candidates who say contradictory things—and can thus be entrapped in speech, Jesus cannot be entrapped in speech.

If he is God, Jesus does not contradict himself.

All that Jesus says and does leads to the fullness of truth, to the fullness of light.

It may *seem* that he contradicts himself, but that is another issue.

The challenge for us is to wade through and beyond the seeming contradictions.

The Pharisees are frustrated with and by Jesus.

Jesus has unveiled their contradictions:

- seeking to control the things of God
- seeking to possess the sacred

In their frustration, what do they do?

They try to deflect what Jesus has underscored

(it *really* sounds like presidential campaigning!).

They try to get Jesus to take sides so that he bring trouble upon himself.

If he says it is lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar, then he has betrayed his people,  
who suffer under Roman occupation.

If he says it is *un*-lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar,  
then he has dismissed Roman civil law—which means conflict with the authorities.

What does Jesus respond?

He cleverly responds without responding.

He obliges *the Pharisees* to respond.

He does so in appealing to the tangible reality of a coin,  
a coin which there is no need to toss, for it is not an “either-or” issue.

Jesus seeks to go beyond the opposition that is created.

In passing, Jesus does acknowledge legitimate civil authority,  
that is, the autonomy and responsibility that humans have to self-govern.

Jesus does acknowledge the “authentically secular”, as Benedict XVI calls it.

But this is not

- the real question
- what Jesus wishes to address.

Jesus does not want to get entangled in political questions  
—as frustrating as that may be to some!

Jesus’ purpose lies beyond the political.

Jesus respects our autonomous minds ...and lets us get entangled in political questions!

You will notice that Jesus did not address the question of Roman occupation.

If he had done so, it would have been “case closed”, end of thinking and conversation.

Instead, notice how merciful Jesus is  
with these disingenuous, plotting Pharisees, who fake praise.  
I would have blasted them! I would have read them the riot act.  
Jesus touches their minds.  
He invites them to think, to search for truth ...for the truth sets us free.  
Aah: Jesus wants to set them free from their frustration,  
and the hatred it is beginning to fuel.  
Jesus shows (strong and firm! "you hypocrites") loving perseverance in their regard.  
And it works: "When they heard this, they were *amazed*."  
Jesus awakens amazement.

If we try to answer the question Jesus poses, what do we discover?

We discover that, although

- there is legitimate civil authority
- we are to be wholeheartedly engaged in our world
- life is to be enjoyed

in the end, *everything* belongs to God, Creator.

When we come to discover this, amazement arises in us.  
Everything that exists, insofar as it exists, is in God's hands!  
*I am in God's hands! I am a pilgrim in God's hands.*  
Oh, the strong and gentle hands of God...  
But, we not only held in existence by God.  
Jesus introduces into the intimate embrace God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
We are not only held in existence, but engaged in love and *embraced!*

Let us this day yield to this embrace.  
When we come forward to receive Christ in the Eucharist,  
we yield in love, to let ourselves be embraced.  
There is no need not fear.  
The Trinitarian embrace is our shelter, our everlasting home.  
Peace is freely given...  
Let us go in peace.