

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

October 19, 2008

Proper 24A 2008

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

In today's continuation of the story of the Exodus, God tells Moses to leave Sinai and move on towards the Promised Land, but that God will not accompany them for their own safety since the people provoke God too much. Moses faces the problem we all face – he is called to live and lead his people into the future but without the presence of the Creator he doesn't know where to go. That is why he pleads to know God's "ways" and "whom you will send with me." Given the current state of the world, isn't this a prayer we should all be saying whatever our religious backgrounds? God promises to send God's "presence" – that is, God's concern and effective involvement – but not God's own self – God's "face"

In an intimate and touching conversation, God explains to Moses why this is impossible – the total Being of God is beyond human comprehension. However, God affirms his promise of presence and his faithfulness to his people through Moses. God offers to Moses (and through Moses to us) a partial glimpse of God's glory. There is something lovingly parental about God hiding Moses in the cleft of a rock

and placing His own hand over Moses as a protective shield so that Moses can only see God's backside as God calls him into the future.

In today's Gospel lesson, following Jesus' confrontations with the Temple authorities, we hear of their attempts to discredit Jesus and the authority of his teachings. Notice that the challenge comes from both the Pharisees and the Herodians. These two groups loathed one another and held each other in utter contempt. Remember that Israel was a conquered state, first under the Greeks and now the Romans. Much like today, cultures were becoming exposed to one another through trade and communications and differing religious and cultural values were encountering one another. The Herodians were the establishment (Herod's party) who dealt openly and willingly with the foreigners – trading with them, governing on their behalf and even intermarrying with them. The Pharisees of Jesus' time wanted to insulate themselves from what they believed to be the foreign corruption and insisted on strict adherence to all Levitical laws by all, not just the temple priests. It is a classic case of "my enemy's enemy is my friend."

So this unseemly alliance approaches Jesus with unctuous and solicitous praise and asks, "Teacher...tell us then, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" It is one of those "Gotcha" questions we see politicians asking one another all the time. If Jesus answers "Yes", he alienates the people who are oppressed by the foreign taxes; if he answers "no" he could be accused of advocating treason against the Emperor.

Jesus not only calls them hypocrites by convicts them of it by directing the audience's attention away from the question to the questioners' own behavior. We don't know who produced the coin, a Pharisee or a Herodian, but they are obviously in this together. If a Pharisee produced the coin, the question would be what is he doing walking around with Caesar's money in his pocket in the first place. If a Herodian produced it, the audience would be reminded that he is in cahoots with Rome every day so why is he of all people asking the question.

But Jesus goes beyond discrediting his opponents. He uses the challenge as a teaching moment. Having discredited them, he resolves the false tax issue with the remark that if the coin is Caesar's, give it back to him. But now he challenges their belief systems by adding "and to God the things that are God's." Rather than neatly resolving a dispute, he confronts them with questions that challenge all of us: What belongs to this world of ours that does not also belong to God? What belongs to God that does not also have a place in this world of ours? Even Caesar, whose image is engraved on the coin, is also made in the image of God and thus belongs to God!

Jesus has posed his own "Gotcha" question to all of us no matter what our culture or our times. This is an acted out parable and we still struggle to find its meaning and answer in our own lives and time.

I once read that it is a sign of poverty, or at least poverty of spirit, to conceive of everything in terms of what you already know or think you know. It is a sign of

intellectual bankruptcy to evaluate everything and everybody according to categories that will admit nothing new because these categories have already hardened into the concrete of what we believe to be true. The Pharisees did not know what to do with Jesus. While he taught many things from the Scriptures, he also healed people on the Sabbath and allowed his followers to pick grain on the Sabbath. He touched and blessed those whom the Law declared to be unclean. In short he threatened their view of God because he saw God in this world. The Herodians were for the most part totally of this world; what mattered to them was their wealth and positions of power. Jesus threatened them by teaching what Moses learned – that societies, communities and economies are empty and unstable without the “Presence” of God. In other words, they must allow God’s principles of justice and peace to be the guiding principals of this world’s societies and states.

Jesus threatens all by insisting that we move beyond our certainties and categories. His opponents sought to entrap him by their categories and with the distraction of an image on a coin. Jesus avoided the trap by focusing on the reality of our existence – our need to be grounded in reality – our being grounded in God’s very Being. That is always a good lesson to remember, but especially in times like the present when we as a people face economic and political uncertainty.

Amen.