

**Reflection on the Gospel-29th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 22:15-21)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The emergence of a common enemy is often the catalyst for sworn enemies to unite. Faced with the threat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, previously unimaginable alliances are being formed in the global community. Some good may ultimately come from these alliances, not just in terms of containing the advance of IS, but of better relations across national boundaries. At a domestic level in first century Palestine, Pharisees and Herodians despised each other, on both religious and political grounds. When both were faced with a perceived threat to their authority, however, they united in opposition. Their “opponent” in that context was Jesus of Nazareth, and no good was to come of their alliance. They come together and try to set a trap for him. In attempting to set him up, they ironically pay him the greatest of tributes: addressing him as ‘teacher’, they acknowledge his sincerity and admit that he teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth. They witness to his lack of concern with status and hierarchical division.

The question of these traditional enemies is intended to put Jesus in a “no win” position: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” Jesus turns the question back upon them. He lets them know that he is aware of their malicious intentions and asks them to produce the coin used for the tax. The Roman denarius that they produce bears the bust of the Roman emperor and the Latin inscription, ‘Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, High Priest’. Jesus’ comment, ‘Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God’, can be interpreted in several ways.

Every Jew knew that everything belongs to God, the earth and all its riches. The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians are Jews, even if the sympathies of the latter lean towards the Roman occupiers. Is Jesus telling them to pay the tax while still recognising God’s prior claim? Is he telling them not to pay the tax precisely because the emperor has no claim on what belongs to God? Is he critiquing or legitimising the Roman occupation? Or is he saying something else? They are left to interpret his response as they wish. One thing is clear: Jesus’ words have nothing to do with the modern distinction between Church and secular state. There are good reasons for paying taxes in a secular state and for contributing financially to the life of the Church. It is quite anachronistic to invoke this text in support of doing so. The story is more about sincerity and truth in our relationships with each other and with the God of all truth. That must be the main criterion for any personal or global alliance, military or otherwise.