

October 16, 2011
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 (p. 215)
Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10
Philippians 2:15d, 16a
Matthew 22:15-21

Turn on the television, choose just about any radio station, or peruse the Internet and you will find that people, whether they are older or younger, are concerned with the world's faltering budgets. Many are concerned about the Nation's budget, the budget of their State, and the budgets of their schools. More important, they are concerned about their own personal budgets that seem to be growing larger while incomes continue to shrink. Needless to say the complexity of these budget worries continue to baffle the minds of even the most expert in the field.

Today's Scripture readings lend themselves to a lesson in Applied Theology where both a theological discussion as well as a practical biblical application lesson concerning budgets and money is needful. Here we note that the religious leaders during the time of Christ used a very real monetary problem in an effort to not only discredit Jesus, but also at the same time gain some momentum in their opposition to the Roman government.

Jesus was very clear when He said, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." This statement, given under a certain amount of duress because as you recall the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to trap Jesus, brings to mind the reality that we live in a dynamic tension between two worlds, the fact of the matter is that we live in both worlds at the same time. We not only live in a temporal world with all of its demands on our budgets, but we also live in a spiritual world that demands budgetary consideration.

But for the moment and with the idea of a budget as a backdrop let us consider what did Jesus mean when he said, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God”? Are we to conclude that this statement is indeed an applicable commandment for us today, or was Jesus talking only about the census tax, which was collected mainly to raise money for the then occupying Roman government?

Certainly Jesus knew that the Pharisees were not happy about paying additional taxes to the Roman government; indeed, I know few people who enjoy paying extra taxes; however, Jesus used the treachery of the Pharisees and Herodians to illustrate several key concepts necessary in the formation of spiritual character?

Some may be asking, “by the way who were the Herodians”? The Herodians were a political group that was aligned with King Herod Antipas who was appointed by the Romans to rule over part of the land of the Jews, from about 4 BC, when his father King Herod the Great had died, to about 39 AD. The Herodians were considered by many Jews to be traitors to their spiritual heritage.

Here we recognize an interesting dichotomy existing between the religious and the secular. The Pharisees who were the main religious leaders and the Herodians who were a type of secular Jewish political group aligned with the Romans were both after the same available *talents* (\$2,000), *minas* (\$35.00), *denarii* (\$.20), *shekels* (\$.65), and *leptons* (the Jewish coin known as the widow’s mite and worth about 1/8 of a cent. Both groups vied for very similar power and monetary advantages.

Needless to say the Pharisees were no great friends of the Herodians, again mainly because of the Herodian political alliance

with the Roman government. Yet on this occasion they were quite willing to temporarily team up with them in an attempt to bring Jesus to a place of ruin.

The Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay the Census Tax to Caesar or not?” If he said don’t pay Caesar, their goal was to get him in trouble with the Herodians and the occupying Roman government, or if He said pay Caesar, then he would be at odds with all the religious leaders and the people who were in opposition to the tax. Either way they hoped to curtail His influence in the lives of the people.

Needless to say, Jesus did not fall for their baited trap, but instead appealed to a higher sense of duty and obedience. “Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” The coin used to pay the census tax was a denarius, worth about 20 cents. He asked them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” In the final analysis their responsibility was to be obedient. Give to Caesar what is his and give to God what is His.

Before we conclude, big deal 20 cents, we need to remember that 20 cents in AD 30 was the amount earned for a full day’s wage before taxes, in our time the equivalency of \$84.50 - 101.40 at today’s minimum wage. Talk about inflation over 2,000 years?

Have you ever wondered where Jesus might have come up with His wonderful answer? Jesus is the Son of God, which makes Him all knowing; yet interestingly, Jesus often referred to the Old Testament Scriptures when revealing the will of His Father. Interestingly, the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah was one of Jesus’ favorite examples. In fact, the New Testament contains more quotes from the Book of Isaiah than any other Old Testament book.

Hence, we would be wise to take a closer look at our first Old Testament reading from the Book of Isaiah.

If we are not mindful, we can easily skip right on through this passage and miss a very important theme concerning the will of God, the people He chooses to bring about His will, and the role the government plays in the formation of godly character.

Many Christians hesitate to admit that God can use the secular world, and especially the government, as a tool in our spiritual formation. We would much rather identify with a holier way to orchestrate the formation of our character, like a vision, or maybe a miracle, or a theophany akin to Moses and the burning bush.

Who wants to admit that the secular government formed our spiritual character? Here I might add that in using the word secular, I am referring to things that are normally not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred. The civil government is considered by many to be non-religious and therefore by definition secular; however, God does not always differentiate between the two. Whether the secular or the religious, He uses both to bring about His divine will in the lives of His people.

Such was the case during the reign of Cyrus the Great. What many people do not realize is that the prophet Isaiah recognized this heathen ruler long before the king was even born. Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). His ministry thus occurred in the latter portion of the 8th century B.C. (ca. 740-701 B.C.). This was some one hundred fifty years before Cyrus came to the throne.

King Cyrus, who evidently understood the principles of giving, eventually, granted to the Jews, whom Nebuchadnezzar had transported to Babylonia, permission to return to Palestine to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.

Another interesting fact is that God used a Persian King who ruled over the territory occupied by the now modern nations of Iraq and Iran, which may be a mere coincidence, or another testimony to the warning that history proves to be a very good but stern teacher. Let us hope and pray that the descendants of King Cyrus would not be needed again, because of the Church and Israel's disobedience, to chastise the People of God. This Persian power once used by God to first usher in the birth of the King of Kings, and it certainly would not be surprising, that if needed, could be used again to prepare the way for His Son's second coming.

Scripture demonstrates the fact that God uses secular governments and their economies to assist Him in the transformation of His people. Understanding today's Gospel message is extremely important to the process of our spiritual formation. "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Simple, forthright, and to the point, what belongs to the world give back to the world, what belongs to God give back to God.

Some people will say Ok, but doesn't everything we have belong to God? Yes it certainly does; however, what did Jesus say? He said, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God"? Take notice of the order. Apparently Jesus believed that some things belong to Caesar and other things belong to God. In other words, He wasn't too concerned about the delineation. When you give to Caesar you will be blessed. When you give to God you will be blessed.

May I suggest that a key point here concerns our attitude in giving, no matter in whatever arena God asks us to give. In other words it was God's hand that directed the OT prophet Isaiah to write and it was the same hand that directed King Cyrus to allow the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Today the same Divine hands direct the leaders of government while at the same time directing the leaders of religious institutions. Both are being directed for the express purpose of facilitating the spiritual formation of the Church, the Bride of Christ.

Here is where the discussion turns towards the practical. We are instructed by Jesus to occupy until He comes and we are commissioned to proclaim His death until He returns. How do we accomplish these and other important duties? Both occupation and proclamation involve resources, time and work. To properly accomplish these tasks we need the aid of a budget. We need to budget our resources, we need to budget our time, and we need to budget our work or energy. As mentioned earlier, these budgets function in the midst of two seemingly opposing worlds, the secular and the religious. However, as we have already learned, God uses both to accomplish His divine purposes.

Budgets include an estimated, often itemized accounting of expected income and expense for a given period in the future. Budgets also include a plan of operations based on such an estimate. Here, in our definition, we see an allocation of resources, time, and work.

One of the first things we need to understand about our Heavenly Father is that He *gets it*. In other words He knows what we need, and in fact He has already given us all that we need to complete our

spiritual journey back home. Last week we mentioned that He gave us both the dowry and the dower, and the wedding garment. Because of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit the Church should lack for nothing.

Children may accuse their parents with, “You just don’t get it” but not our Father in Heaven he does *get it*. God understands macro and microeconomics. He understands limited resources, time, and energy. He understands government, taxes, mortgages, rent, transportation, insurance, rising food costs, and yes even the need for a little discretionary cash. He *gets it*.

However, do we *get it*? What *we* may fail to get is the way He designed the whole Divine economic plan to work. God’s plan is pretty simple. If we follow the plan we get the benefits, if not we suffer the loss. The plan *is* simple, and we get to choose the bottom line - profit or loss.

Listen again to the simplicity of Jesus’ micro/macro budgetary economic policy, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Notice the word repay; “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Implied here is that what remains after giving back to Caesar and giving back to God is then ours to budget as we choose.

So then, some may ask, how is this plan supposed to work when expenses already exceed income? Again, all that God accomplishes is a work in progress. Every person, every household, every entity is unique, although we all share in some similarities. So first we will speak to the rule and not the exception.

When we receive our wages we are to repay Caesar what is Caesars. With this task completed we should be free to give to God what is Gods. The Old Testament rule of thumb is a tithe, which means a tenth. The New Testament rule of thumb is, “to whom much is given much is required.” It would seem reasonable to assume that a tithe in the Old Testament would also apply to the New Testament. Again, the rest of our remaining wages are ours to budget.

Our economic problems begin when we spend more money than our budget allows and then we are tempted to either rob from God or rob from the government to pay for our overspending. Either form of robbery will bring about dire consequences, consequences that eventually led the Israelites into captivity and the United States into the economic problems it faces.

The OT prophet Malachi writes, “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed me. But you say, wherein have we robbed you? You have robbed me in tithes and offerings” (Mal. 3:7-9).

So then, how are we to repair the damage? First we must repent and ask the Lord’s forgiveness for our sin. If we have robbed Caesar or robbed God we have committed a transgression against the Word of the Lord, and the sin must be dealt with. Second, we must establish a budget to account for our spending, and then cut back in certain areas to balance it properly.

For example, one family just saved over \$70.00 per month by switching their auto and home insurance to a different company, while at the same time their overall coverage greatly increased. We know that it is entirely possible to spend less on food while at the same time eat a whole lot better, and that also includes

occasionally going out to eat. Families can save a lot here by doing a little research before they go shopping or out to eat. If you are going to do both the same day, eat first then shop, you will spend a lot less.

Entertainment and transportation expenditures need to be examined as well as expenditures for clothing, and phone, and TV, and vacations, and etc. Even heating and air conditioning costs can be lowered, as well as our electrical and gas and water bills if we will but be mindful of how we are using and at times even wasting our resources.

What if we still struggle in our giving to God? Here we need to look to the Bible as our guide. Whatever we do must line up with Scripture. We will soon discover that God asks everyone to give. Some may ask, "Why must I give?" The reason He requires us to give is not because He needs the cash, He doesn't.

God knows that there are powerful forces involved with the natural and supernatural laws of sowing and reaping. These forces will either bless us one hundred fold, or they will cause us to struggle or even on occasion stumble and sin. The fact remains that when we give we receive. A farmer will not harvest unless he first sows.

There are many wealthy people who do not live for God who understand this principle, and so they give. They have discovered that when we hoard and keep for ourselves what we have been given, it will somehow be taken from us.

God's economic rewards policy is simple, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, and see if I do not open the

floodgates of heaven for you, and pour down upon you blessing without measure!”

Therefore, May Almighty God direct our hearts to give cheerfully and with good measure, for we pray in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.