

Homily for June 6, 2017

In today's Gospel, Jesus escapes from a trap with one of his most famous one-liners: "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." We should not read this as though there is a clearly-demarcated political realm that belongs to the Caesars of the world, and a clearly-demarcated spiritual realm that belongs to God. And we certainly shouldn't read it in the modern mode—that the public arena belongs to politics, while religion is relegated to the private dimension.

No, this won't do, precisely because God is God. He's not a being in or above the world, nor one reality among many. God is the sheer act of being itself, who pervades, influences, grounds, and has to do with everything, even as he transcends everything in creation.

God is the deepest source for everything in life from sports to law to the arts to science and to medicine. What has seized the lawyer (at his best) is a deep passion for justice, and God is justice itself; what has seized the doctor (at her best) is a deep passion for alleviating suffering, and God is love itself. Everything comes from God and returns to God.

To render to Caesar what is his and to God what is his is to understand that we live in an ordered world where we have responsibilities to the state, as citizens of a given country and responsibilities to God.

To be responsible citizens means that we will pay our taxes and live within the given laws of Canada. To live as responsible Christians means that we will honour God by adhering to the precepts of the Church. These are to attend Mass weekly, go to confession at least yearly, receive the Sacrament of the Body and blood of Jesus once during the Easter Season, Fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and contribute to the Church's financial needs.

These are just the basics of what it means to be a good citizen and a good Christian.

In the Book of Tobit we read of a man whose faith informed him far beyond the basic obligations and in the reading for this evening we see how this has effected him.

Tobit lived in Assyria where they had a custom of leaving their dead exposed to the birds who would take the flesh of the deceased. In their theology, the birds conveyed the deceased to heaven, to the high god Ahura Mazda. The Assyrians loathed burial, while the Hebrews abhorred exposure to the carrion birds. Tobit regards the burial of a dead kinsman as so important that he makes himself ritually impure on the Feast of Pentecost by burying a man who had been murdered. The birds which are deprived of their lunch that Pentecost Day retaliate in the evening by bombing Tobit with their droppings, depriving him of his sight.

So dedicated is Tobit to his faith and to render God what is rightfully his, that he not only suffers the effects of blinding but he is also deeply stressed. Not only are his neighbours against him for his burial practises, to the point they want to kill him, others are very suspicious of him. So distraught is Tobit by the way he and his family is being treated that he takes it out on his

wife. He accuses her of theft and demands she return the goat to its rightful owners. His wife then challenges him with these words:

Where are your acts of charity? Where are your righteous deeds? These things are known about you!

Tobit then tells us how he reacted to his wife's challenge:

Then with much grief and anguish of heart I wept, and with groaning began to pray

There is an honesty to this passage that can be an encouragement when we want to be faithful to Jesus' teaching. To live a life of dedicated and devoted service to God can lead to experiences where, like Tobit, we can feel overwhelmed by living in obedience to God. We can at times then lose a proper perspective.

Tobit is a book that shows us with realism a family that is truly godly and challenged by rendering to God what is his in a culture that had very different values.