

Turning the Tables

This Week's Readings at Mass

- Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 • Rewards to Cyrus, king of Persia
- 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 • A model for believers
- Matthew 22:15-21 • Paying tax to the emperor

The Pharisees are getting more and more uncomfortable with Jesus' teachings, so they try to turn the tables and trap him. The irony is that usually the Pharisees dislike the Herodians who are supporters of King Herod, the Roman ruler of their land. However, in their desire to unite against a common enemy—Jesus—they enlist the Herodians' help.

The Jews were required to pay taxes to their hated occupiers, the Romans. Not only were the taxes oppressive to the majority of people who were poor, but they had to be paid with Roman coins engraved with Caesar's image. Jewish laws strictly forbid images or engravings of God, and the fact that Caesar billed himself as a god was especially offensive to Jews. Understandably, Jews were resentful about the entire situation because paying the tax gave the impression that they were participating in Caesar's worship. So if Jesus were to respond that it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees would find fault with him. On the other hand, the Herodians, as representatives of the Romans, will take issue with Jesus if he suggests they shouldn't pay the taxes.

Jesus responds brilliantly, refusing to give a yes or no answer. When the Pharisees hand him a Roman coin, they convict themselves. This episode takes place in the Jerusalem temple, and Jewish tradition said that they could not carry such coins in the sacred temple. (That is why there were money-changers on hand—to convert the Roman money to Jewish money for currency in the temple.) So the Pharisees are “outed” for

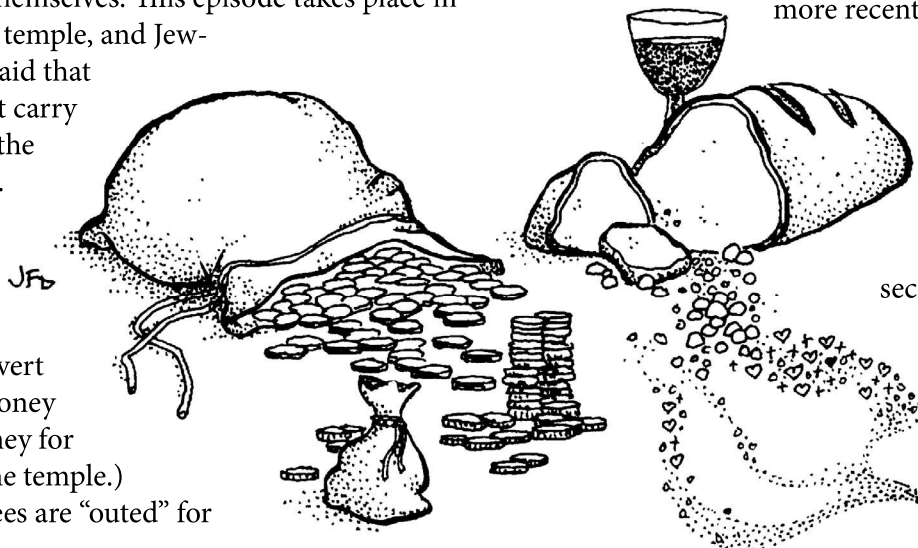


their cooperation with Rome, and Jesus moves the conversation to a different level. The coin with the emperor's image belongs to the emperor to begin with—so give it back to him, he says. Then, he lays out the real challenge for those trying to trap him—discern what is of God and give that your attention and respect.

Questions of the Week

- 1 History is full of examples of repressive rulers requiring the oppressed people to do demeaning things. Can you give a more recent example?

- 2 When have you experienced a conflict between your religious beliefs and the laws of a secular government?



Word of the Week •
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