

WHOSE IMAGE DO WE BEAR?

(29th Sunday OT A: Is 45,1.4-6; 1 Thes 1,1-5b; Mt 22,15-21) - Fr. John Sang, CMF

Dear brothers and sisters, when we look at a coin, it is easy to see who it belongs to. But sometimes we forget who we belong to. In today's Gospel, the Pharisees and the Herodians try to trap Jesus with a question: *"Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"* If Jesus says yes, He risks turning the people against Him. If He says no, He could be accused of rebelling against Rome. Jesus asks for a coin and says: **"Whose image is this and whose inscription?"** They reply, *"Caesar's."* Then Jesus says: **"Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."** But His answer takes us deeper: **If the coin bears Caesar's image, what bears God's image?** Genesis gives us the answer: **"God created mankind in his image"** (Gen 1:27). And suddenly, the meaning becomes personal: the coin bears Caesar's image; **we bear God's image.** The coin belongs to Caesar; **our lives belong to God.** So if we belong to God, how should we live?

First, we need to recognize that **God alone is Lord of our lives.** In the first reading, God chooses Cyrus, a pagan king, to free Israel. Cyrus is powerful, but he is not the Lord of history. Only **God is**, as He declares: **"I am the Lord, there is no other"** (Is 45:5). This helps us understand Jesus' words: **"Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar."** Caesar has a rightful place, but **Caesar is not God.** As Christians, we have responsibilities to our families, our society, and our country. But St. Paul reminds us: **"Our citizenship is in heaven"** (Phil 3:20). We live responsibly in this world, but **our ultimate loyalty belongs to God.** That means we must never allow **money, power, status, or success** to take God's place in our hearts. As St. Teresa of Ávila beautifully said: **"Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices."** So in the end, the real question is not **"How much do I have?"** but **"Who has my heart?"**

Second, if we belong to God, then we are called to **give our lives back to Him.** St. Paul speaks of offering ourselves **"as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God"** (Rom 12:1). But giving our lives to God is more than words; sometimes **faithfulness comes at a cost.** When the Apostles were ordered to stop preaching about Jesus, they boldly replied: **"We must obey God rather than men"** (Acts 5:29). Saint Thomas More lived out this conviction. He faithfully served his country and his king. But when faced with a choice between earthly authority and his Christian conscience, he chose to remain faithful to God. Most of us will never face martyrdom. But we face smaller choices: **truth or dishonesty, forgiveness or revenge, service or selfishness, God's will or our own.** Whenever we choose what belongs to God, we are saying: **"Lord, I belong to You."** So giving to God what belongs to God means more than a few minutes of prayer or one hour at Sunday Mass. It means **giving Him our whole lives.** As St. Ignatius of Loyola prayed: **"Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will... All is yours."**

Finally, if we belong to God and have given our lives to Him, then our lives should **reflect His image.** St. Paul tells us that Christ is **"the image of the invisible God"** (Col 1:15), and the Catechism teaches that in Christ the image of God in us is revealed in its fullness (1701). So if we want to know what we are called to become, **we need only look at Jesus.** Today's second reading shows us what this looks like in everyday life: **"your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope"** (1 Thess 1:3). In other words, **faith must become action, love must become self-giving, and hope must become perseverance.** And this begins in ordinary moments of life: **in the way we speak to one another, forgive one another, care for those in need, and serve without seeking recognition.** The more we love, forgive, and serve as Jesus did, the more clearly others will see **God's image reflected in us.**

Dear brothers and sisters, today's Gospel leaves us with three simple truths: We belong to God. We are called to give our lives to God. And we are called to reflect God through the way we live. May others see God in us through **a faith that acts, a love that gives, a hope that perseveres, a heart that forgives, and hands that serve.** For in the end, the coin bears Caesar's image, so we give it back to Caesar. But we bear God's image, so we give ourselves back to God. And the most beautiful way to give ourselves to God is to use our lives to love and serve one another. Amen.