

## Faithfully Focused Rendering

Well... I say every week that the lessons appointed for our meditation each Sunday have been appointed for centuries, and God knows what He's doing. He knows exactly what we need to hear, and when we need to hear it. Today's Gospel lesson is no different. It was appointed for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Trinity hundreds of years before the United States even existed. I will confess: I *almost* didn't preach this text today. I almost chose a different Gospel lesson; a lesson from the more current three-year lectionary. *It would've been easier.* Let's face it: Some will hear "Render unto Caesar," and feelings of anger immediately arise. "*Render unto Caesar?! Are you kidding me?! Those wicked and crooked monsters?! Never!*" Others, however, will gladly hear these words and attempt to lord them over the others. They hear the same words, and with a smug grin, point to the red letters, "*Thus sayeth the Lord! Get over it. Accept the results. Be a good Christian and render unto Caesar!*"

The really troubling thing is that this great divisiveness and *selective hearing and selective obedience to our Lord's Word* has been the case, not just the past week, but also the past four years (although the shoe was certainly on the other foot all that time, which I guess somehow makes it different or acceptable in those instances?), and even long before that. I recall the problems these same words of our Lord caused way back in the battle between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, and I was getting my news from the elementary school Weekly Reader at that time, and I know quite well that the divisive anger and the selective obedience and the smugness goes way back before that too. Just look at the text. Issues between rendering unto Caesar and rendering unto God were incendiary and problematic in Jesus' time. It hasn't gotten better since then.

And it's at this point, especially the way things have gone the past few election cycles, no matter what side you find yourself on, that the focus ultimately winds up on *what I need to do* (which should already tip you off as being a problem). What, exactly, do I need to render unto Caesar? More importantly, what do I *not* have to render to Caesar and still be considered a good Christian? For example, I understand I'm supposed to pay my taxes and render unto Caesar. Our Lord makes this clear, right? But what if Caesar uses those taxes to fund abortion? What do I do then? What if Caesar refuses to provide medical care for anyone over the age of 75, saying that they've outlived their usefulness and they should just die? What then? Caesar says no singing in church, mask or no mask. Caesar says no holy communion. Caesar is once again saying that the Divine Service is a non-essential service. Lock the doors to church and stay home. Do I render unto Caesar or do I render unto God? *Opinions certainly differ, even among "good Christians."*

And the same goes on the God side of the conundrum too. ***Bare minimums and what-ifs abound.*** I don't know of a single self-proclaimed Christian who would flat-out say that they don't have to render appropriate worship and obedience to God. ***No one is that stupid... are they?*** And yet, what if rendering unto God means having to do something I don't like or I'm uncomfortable with? What if rendering unto God goes against popular opinion or Caesar's opinion? God says, *"Let us not neglect to meet together,"* but Caesar says otherwise. God says, *"As often as you do this, remember what I have said. This is My body. This is My blood. Take and eat."* Caesar, on the other hand, has all kinds of advice on how to be a good Christian without even having to get out of bed, let alone take up any kind of cross and follow Christ into His holy house to receive His life-giving gifts. ***What to do, what to do?*** The way of the cross and the path of least resistance are not the same, nor will they ever be. What if rendering unto God means having to go against my own ***personal desires or preferences?*** I've often said that many who call themselves "Christian" should just give up the charade. Go home and set up an altar with some candles and a mirror at the center, because in that mirror is the god you really worship. Just how much do I have to render to God in order to keep myself out of darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth? What about the separation of Church and State? What about my rights? What about my feelings? ***I'm still a good Christian! Don't judge me!***

Folks: This is why I didn't want to preach this text today. In the end people will do what they want to do. They will render unto Caesar when it suits them, and they will render unto God when it suits them. No matter what is said, people will ultimately do (or not do) what they desire. It's really no different than the time of the Old Testament Judges. ***"Every man did what was right in his own eyes."***

Well... maybe our eyes are focused on the wrong thing. [Pointing to the crucifix] ***"Whose image and inscription is this?"*** Folks: This has nothing to do with taxes or coins or elections. It has nothing to do with what you like or don't like, and it certainly has nothing to do with what you need to do or not do in order to stay on the right side of God. ***Whose image and inscription is this?*** You see, these words of Christ find **perfect fulfillment** in Him, the Almighty God who took on flesh. Consider the testimony of St. Paul. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul professes that Jesus *"is the icon/image of the invisible God. In Him the whole fullness of God dwells bodily."* Jesus Himself tells Philip when Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father. *"Show you the Father? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father."* Folks: Here is the image and likeness of almighty God, in the flesh. ***You wanna see God? Look right here. Look to Christ.***

And that takes us even deeper. Look to this bloody cross. Here is the very icon and image of God's ***wrath*** against sin. This is what it looks like to be utterly

forsaken by God. You see it, and yet you don't see it. You don't see it because you can't even begin to understand the hellish wrath Christ endured for you on this cross in your place. Here in this bloodied corpse of God-in-the-flesh; here is the *perfect image of perfect faith and obedience*. Jesus didn't just talk the talk, but truly walked the walk when it came to rendering unto Caesar and rendering unto God. Yes, He renders His very life unto His heavenly Father...we get that. But He also renders Himself to the wicked authorities, both Jewish and Roman; both religious and governmental. Jesus rendered unto Caesar in spite of the fact that His death sentence was a result of an absolutely corrupt trial by wicked and corrupt authorities. When bold St. Peter drew his sword and struck one of the men arresting Jesus, Jesus rebuked Peter. *"Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled?"* Jesus willingly rendered Himself unto absolute wickedness and corruption knowing full-well that such rendering meant bitter sufferings and death... all for you. He humbled Himself; that is, His desires, His preferences, His will was all brought in submissive service to His Father. *"Not My will, but Thy will be done."*

Look at this cross! Here in this mangled, bloodied corpse of Christ is the *crystal-clear exact image* of God's unconditional and incomprehensible love for you, for me, and for all mankind. *You wanna talk authority? Behold your Lord of all lords and King of all kings!* His wounds bear the image and permanent inscription of His Father's wrath against sin—yes—and these same mortal wounds also bear the indelible inscription of Christ's love and obedience to His Father...*unwavering, rock-solid love and obedience* that He poured out all for you. Three days later the risen and victorious Jesus would stand before His dumbfounded disciples and show them these same indelible marks, only now Jesus will interpret for them what these permanent sacrificial inscriptions mean for them and for all humanity: "Peace."

My fellow redeemed: Those bewildered apostles' reality is your reality, now and into all eternity, for Christ *forever* bears these sacrificial wounds and inscriptions as reminders to His heavenly Father that *the full wage of sin has been rendered in Him and because of Him*. *"It is finished!"* Look in the mirror. Look at your neighbor. Here is one Christ loved enough to die for. Look to this cross; look to this font; look to this altar—here in all these things is the image and inscription of Christ. Here is the very image and icon of God's love for you. Here is your peace that surpasses all human understanding. **Here is Christ.**

This really puts everything else in proper perspective, doesn't it? It should. When viewed through the lens of Christ's cross, which you were baptized into, how can repentant faith—in all circumstances and in all things—be okay with

rendering anything less than Christ-centered obedience, thanks and praise in response? May **ALL** that you say, think, and do be kept in *proper, thankful, cruciform perspective*, and may your entire life be a constant rendering of repentance, humble obedience, thanks and praise in response to all that God has rendered unto you and all that He continues to render unto you in Christ, through Christ, and because of Christ.

To Him alone be all glory, all praise, and all honor. **AMEN**