

WORD OF LIFE | OCTOBER 2023

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. (Mt. 22:21)

Jesus has entered Jerusalem and people have acclaimed that he is the 'Son of David'. This is a royal title that Matthew's Gospel attributes to the Christ who has come to announce that the Kingdom of God is eminent.

In this context, a unique dialogue takes place between Jesus and a group of people who question him. Some are Herodians and others are Pharisees, two groups that held differing views with respect to the power of the Roman emperor. They ask him whether or not he judges it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor and thus force him to take sides for or against Caesar and, therefore, create the basis to make possible accusations against him.

But Jesus answers with another question about the image stamped on the coinage of the time. Since it is that of Caesar's, he replies:

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

But what is due to the emperor, Caesar, and what is due to God?

Jesus recalls the primacy of God: for just as the image of the emperor was stamped on the Roman coins, so the image of God is stamped on every human being.

The rabbinic tradition itself affirms that every person is created in the likeness of God,ⁱ just as Caesar's image was imprinted on coinage. So, it is logical that Jesus' statement holds true and gives us the answer to the question that was asked of him.

Therefore, it is to God alone that we can give ourselves completely. To him alone, we belong and in him, we find freedom and dignity. No human power can claim the same allegiance.

'If there is anyone who knows God and can help us give him his rightful place, it is Jesus. For him ... to love meant doing the Father's will with all his mind, heart, energy, and life. He gave himself entirely to the plan his Father had for him. The Gospel shows us that his focus was always upon the Father He asks the same of us: to love means to do the will of the Father, without half measures, but with our whole being. We are asked to do this wholly and completely because we cannot give God anything less than everything.'ⁱⁱ

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Often we are faced with dilemmas or difficult choices that threaten to make us slip into the temptation of finding an easy way out. Jesus too was tested when faced with two ideological solutions but for him it was clear: the priority was the coming of the kingdom of God and the primacy of love.

This Word of Life makes us ask if our hearts are won over by fame, making rapid progress in our careers, or other attractions the world has to offer. Do we give things their rightful place with God?

Jesus' answer is an invitation for us to a serious and thorough discernment of values and what we place as a priority in our lives.

Deep in our consciences we can discern a voice that is sometimes overpowered by other voices but, nevertheless, if we fine tune ourselves to His voice it will be recognizable. It is the voice that urges us to tirelessly seek ways of creating fraternity. It's the voice that always encourages us to renew this choice, even at the cost of going against the tide of current opinion.

This is fundamental if we wish to build the foundations of genuine dialogue with others and try to find together adequate answers to the complexity of life. This does not mean we shirk personal responsibility towards society but that we offer ourselves in selfless service for the common good.

During the time Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually executed for civil resistance towards Nazism, he wrote to his fiancée, 'I do not mean the faith that flees the world, but the faith that endures in the world and loves and remains faithful to the earth, despite all the tribulations it brings us. Our marriage must be a "yes" to God's earth, it must strengthen our courage to work and create something on earth. I fear that Christians who dare to stand with only one foot on earth will have only one foot in heaven too.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Edited by Letizia Magri and the Word of Life team.

ⁱ Cf Gen 1:26

ⁱⁱ Chiara Lubich, Word of Life, Oct 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maria von Wedemeyer, 'Lettera alla Fidanzata' Brescia 1992