

Imaginative Contemplation – Whose head is this?

Render to Caesar
the things that are Caesar's,



Matthew 22:21

And to God
the things that are God's.

Introduction

The most frequent way of praying that Saint Ignatius uses is that of imagining ourselves in a Gospel scene. We imagine ourselves as a character in the story. We take part in the story, seeing Jesus and all the other people, being aware of what's going on and how we are feeling. The purpose of praying with the imagination is to allow Christ in the Scripture to speak to us. To bring the Gospel stories to life for us. We are not trying to recreate history. It doesn't matter if your imagination takes the story off in a different direction to the Scripture. It doesn't matter if the story takes place in 1st century Palestine or where we live now in the 21st century. What is important is what God wants to say to us through this passage.

Let us sit and relax so that together we can contemplate the Gospel using our imagination.

Prayer

We acknowledge we are in the presence of God so let us say together:

Direct O Lord and guide and influence all that is happening in my mind and heart during this time of prayer: all my moods and feelings, my memories and imaginings; my hopes and desires; may all be directed and influenced to your greater glory, praise and service and to my growth in your Spirit.

Amen

Let the Spirit enter our hearts and enlighten our minds to awareness of our responsibility to both the spiritual and the temporal dominion.

Reading Matthew 22:15-21

Then the Pharisees went away to work out between them how to trap Jesus in what he said. And they sent their disciples to him, together with the Herodians, to say, 'Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you.

Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, 'You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for me?

Let me see the money you pay the tax with.' They handed him a denarius, and he said, 'Whose head is this? Whose name?' 'Caesar's' they replied. He then said to them, 'Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God'.'

Contemplation

In the past few Sunday Gospel Readings, Jesus has been addressing the religious leaders berating them for their leadership and for not recognising in him the love of God and the Word of God. In today's reading on the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus is being challenged by the Pharisees and the Herodians, their plan being to attempt to get Jesus to discredit himself and thus catch him out. With this in mind, let us enter the scene and listen to Jesus' reply to a seemingly innocent question..

- Who are you in the scene? One of the disciples? One of the disciples of the Pharisees? One of the Herodians? Someone following Jesus? Someone who is not mentioned in the passage?
- Where does this discussion take place? In the Temple? In the market place? In public?

- Why are you there? Are you with Jesus? Are you just passing by? Is the area busy? Quiet? Look around you. What are people doing? What is Jesus doing?
- What is going through your mind when you see the Pharisees and Herodians together approaching Jesus? Do you immediately think there is going to be trouble since you know that Pharisees and Herodians despise each other?
- When they start to speak saying 'Master, we know that you are an honest man' are you quietly surprised since this is a non-confrontational opening but a true statement? Do you think that perhaps Jesus' opponents are starting to come round to his way of thinking? Or that these opening words are full of hypocrisy?
- What about the question "Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Do you think it is a fair question? Or do you see where the question is heading? If Jesus says "No" then he would be reported to the Roman authorities. If he said "Yes" he would be regarded as a Roman collaborator. Do you think that Jesus will be backed into a corner from which he can't escape?
- Do you wait with baited breath for his answer? Are you surprised when he asks to see a coin with which people pay their taxes? Are you surprised when he tells them "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God"?
- Watch the reaction of the Pharisees and the Herodians when Jesus gives them his answer. What is the look on their faces? Anger that they have failed to catch Jesus out? Anger that they are the ones who have been caught out? Are they speechless?
- What about your reaction? Have you ever thought that you are a citizen of both the country in which you live and God's Kingdom? Does Jesus' answer make you realise that you have a responsibility to both kingdoms? That you have a responsibility for the community in which you live? That being a good citizen and paying taxes helps build the community in which you live? That it is not in contradiction to serving God since a community is built on love, fairness and justice? Has it ever crossed your mind that God works through human systems and that if you don't pay taxes then the community would be deprived of its basic building blocks?

Is there anything you want to say to Jesus regarding his answer? Talk to him and tell him about the conflicts that may be going on in your mind regarding your dual citizenship. Ask Jesus for his help to build good relationships wherever you are.

Sharing

Let us now spend 10 minutes reflecting this Gospel passage and then share what we thought, felt etc. only if you are comfortable to do so.

End Prayer Suscipe of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,

All I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.

Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.

Scripture texts: from the Jerusalem Bible 1966 by Dartington Longman & Todd Ltd
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