

October Word of Life

'Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God' (Mt. 22:21).

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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 at hand.

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 thus forcing him to take sides for or against Caesar and in this way, creating a basis for possible accusations against him.

But Jesus answers with another question, asking whose image is stamped on the coinage of the time. Since it is that of the emperor, he replies:

'Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God'

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 is 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, just as Caesar's image was imprinted on coinage: 'When a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy Blessed One, stamped every human with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them are like another' (Mishna Sanhedrin 4,5).

Therefore, it is to God alone that we can give ourselves completely, to him alone do 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, as Chiara Lubich wrote, ... "to love meant doing the Father's will with all his mind, heart, energy and life itself: he gave himself entirely to the Father's plan 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 Beloved, without half measures, with our whole being ... We are asked to do this wholly and completely because we cannot give God anything less than everything: our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind.'

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Often we are faced with dilemmas or difficult choices that threaten to make us slip into the temptation of finding a loophole or easy ways 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 question ourselves: are our hearts swayed by fame, by a steep career progression? Do we admire successful people, the various influencers? Do we perhaps give to things, the place that belongs to God?

With his answer Jesus asks for an improvement. He invites us to a serious and thorough discernment of our scale of values.

Deep in our consciences we can discern a voice that is sometimes subtle and overpowered by other voices but, nevertheless, is recognizable. It is the voice that urges us to tirelessly seek ways of creating fraternity and always encourages us to renew this choice, even at the cost of going against the tide of current opinion.

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

Edited by Letizia Magri and the Word of Life team.