

Sunday Homily

19TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

18 OCTOBER 2020

YEAR A

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew 22:21

Illustration

The hero of *Silas Marner*, written by George Eliot in 1861, is a weaver who is forced to leave the Christian community in which he lives after he is wrongly accused of stealing. Betrayed by his best friend, separated from the woman he had hoped to marry and his whole acquaintance, all he has left is his skill as a weaver. Silas settles on the edge of the sleepy village of Raveloe where he spends his time doing only two things: making money and counting it. The twin rhythms of weaving the cloth and counting the gold dominate Silas’ existence. He behaves like a machine, untouched by interaction with others or any other emotion. Silas begins to awaken from this mechanical lifestyle when his gold is stolen. But change really comes when he returns one day to find a new kind of gold by his fireside, the golden hair of an orphaned girl. As he brings up this child, whom he names Eppie, Silas regains his soul, opening his heart and his home to others, reconciling the physical and spiritual dimensions of his life.

Gospel Teaching

In today’s Gospel the Pharisees set out deliberately to set a trap for Jesus by asking him if it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. But it is the Pharisees who seem to have fallen into a trap, that of attempting to divide the physical from the spiritual. If Jesus says that paying taxes to a pagan conqueror is permissible, they can denounce him as spiritually unworthy, someone who does not respect the higher authority of God. However, if Jesus says that paying taxes is not permissible, his enemies would hope that the temporal forces of the Roman occupiers would intervene and arrest Jesus for inciting revolt.

Jesus’ reply to the question is more than an intellectually deft escape. It is a profound comment on the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, between the sacred and the secular. “Give... to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” says Jesus. He urges us to give due attention to the secular and the material and proper attention to the sacred and spiritual in their turn. He does not suggest that we attempt to divide the two and to live either entirely in the physical, or completely in the spiritual domain, like a hermit. Rather, Jesus warns that as human beings, with bodies and

souls, we cannot afford to disregard either. To do so risks either the emptiness of Silas Marner's mechanical life of weaving and counting, or, at the other extreme, death from neglect of our bodies.

The temptation to compartmentalise our lives into physical or spiritual is strong. For some people work can become a purely physical realm where they earn money and carry out their tasks without consideration of the other dimensions of their faith which might apply. They mistakenly imagine that God is not interested in this aspect of their lives, or in the mundane household business of living. Jesus reminds us that God is interested in all that we do, asking us to deal wisely and thoughtfully with the material as well as the spiritual aspects of life. God wants us to pray and worship and do good, but he also cares about how and where we spend our money and how we go about earning it.

Application

We need Christ's wisdom and grace if we are to escape from the trap of compartmentalising our lives into sacred and secular. When moral or ethical dilemmas interrupt the humdrum, physical compartment we call work/home we need courage not to turn a "blind eye" or to opt for a quiet life. While we are engaged in secular activities, spiritual values, those of love and justice, still apply. Our duty to God and to God's law is paramount.

Yet such spiritual values should not lead us to despise the secular, events or people. If our religious convictions lead us to shun all that is not purely spiritual, we could end up with a life as barren as that of a miser. Jesus calls us to treat the sacred and the secular with due respect, to strive to integrate them, not to separate them. We need to be ready to find the sacred in the apparently secular and to allow our spiritual values to influence our lives in the material realm.