

Father Dave's Weekly Homily

10/16/11 29 A

- Early this past week I was in Chicago as our Midwest Muslim-Catholic Dialogue discussed a paper on *Religion in Civic Life*. At first glance, it seems to fit in well with the gospel we just heard. Indeed, the draft of the paper even refers to this gospel passage at one point.
- After all, the subject Jesus debates with his adversaries, who are from two very different groups within the Jewish community of his day, is paying taxes to the government (in this case, a foreign government). That's enough to get arguments going in any society from any century!
- In a sense, Jesus' response to their question is brilliant. He avoids the trap they are setting for him. He also exposes them as hypocrites. They easily produce the coin for paying taxes with the image of the emperor on it. One of them has it in his pocket.
- We should remember that the coin not only carried the emperor's picture, but an inscription which effectively proclaimed him the son of God. It was a serious offense to carry such a coin into the temple area.
- But his answer doesn't give us a lot of specific advice on how to deal with questions about religion and politics. What does that mean: *Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's*? How that gets spelled out in practice has been debated endlessly over the years.
- In fact, though, Jesus is changing the terms of the question. As that coin is produced with the emperor's image, he's inviting us to consider the question *Whose image do I reflect?*
- At the very beginning of the Bible in the story of creation we are told that we are made in the image and likeness of God. One of the first catechism questions we "older" Catholics remember memorizing told us the same thing.
- We could say that we are "coins" of God. Therefore, when all is said and done, God has the biggest claim on our lives. Our bedrock

commitment to God's ways should be more important than any political alliances.

-- Of course, our commitment to God's ways should influence how we participate in society, how we vote, how we work for justice and peace. But working that out can be tricky. And no particular political group has a corner on God's ways. Anybody who would make that claim should be viewed with suspicion.

-- In fact, a strong case can be made that the major political groups in our country all promote, in one way or another, an ideology of self-interest. That is a far cry from the gospel call of selflessness and even the willingness to sacrifice for others and for the sake of God's work.

-- In any case, God is bigger than our idea of him. God can work through pagan leaders, as he did through King Cyrus some 26 centuries ago. God's work is not limited by our notions of what it should be.

-- Meanwhile, Jesus continues to pose the question to us: *Who has the biggest claim on your life? Whose image do you reflect?* It is a daily challenge to try to reflect Jesus by what we do in our lives. But it is a challenge we are called to work at every day.

-- May God's grace, working within us, help us to live up to this challenge.