



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Twenty-Third Sunday After Trinity - November 7, 2021

"Then saith Jesus unto them, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.'"

St. Matthew 22:21b (KJV)

One morning, a mother took her three children out to a diner for breakfast. It was crowded, so they had to take separate seats at the counter. Eight-year-old Mary, her eldest daughter, was seated at the far end of the counter, and when her food was served, she boldly called down to her mother:

"Mother, don't people say grace in this place?"

A hush came over the entire diner and before Mary's mother could figure out what to say, the smiling counterman turned and said to the young girl:

"Yes, we do little sister - how about you say it?"

Suddenly, all the people in the diner bowed their heads, at which point, Mary bowed her head and in a clear voice prayed:

"God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food."



(What follows is largely based on Chapter 12 of Max Lucado's 1993 book, "And the Angels were Silent".)



Words and how we CHOOSE to use them can make a world of difference. Or to put it another way, we can CHOOSE, through our use of words, to be:

-  **part of this world; or**
-  **part of God's.**

The events that occurred just prior to - and during - today's Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 22:15-22, serve as, perhaps, the most abject lesson found in all of Holy Scripture of how:

-  **choices are made**
-  **through words that are spoken.**

The scene takes place on the Tuesday during the last week in the earthly life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

-  **Long before the multi-thonged Roman 'flagellum' scourged, WORDS were hurled;**
-  **Long before the crucifixion spikes were hammered, ACCUSATIONS were made; and**
-  **Long before Jesus had to bear the Calvary's Cross, He had to bear the ACID TONGUES of the religious leaders.**

Note that the dialogue appears innocent enough (in that no swords were drawn and no arrests were made) and yet, the accusers were out for blood:

-  **Jesus' blood;**
-  **'The Word Made Flesh's' blood;**
-  **'The Lamb of God's' blood.**

The procedure for being recognized as a religious teacher in Palestine at that time was quite straightforward. Originally (that is, before Jesus came to earth), rabbinical candidates had been ordained by a leading rabbi whom they respected and under whose tutelage or teaching they served. This, however, led to a wide variance in both:

- 🎓 **qualifications; and**
- 👤 **teaching,**

as well as in:

- 🌐 **widespread abuses by unscrupulous rabbis over their vulnerable students.**

It was, to say the very least, the age-old story of “The Powerful” over “The Powerless”.

(Likewise, just take the thousands of women and men who have bravely come forward **during the past few years alone** to report shocking instances of:

- ⚠️ **bullying;**
- ⚠️ **extortion;**
- ⚠️ **coercion; and**
- ⚠️ **sexual harassment, abuse, and assault,**

by those who held positions of power over them and we’ll see that not much has changed in 2,000 years, has it? Furthermore, this past week I have been reading from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, as the First Lesson at both the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, and, interestingly, King Solomon, who is generally regarded by most conservative Biblical scholars to have written the timeless words of Ecclesiastes toward the end of his life, c. 935 BC – **meaning that he wrote the book over 2,950 years ago!** – was able to assert, **even way back then,** in chapter 1, verses 9-10:

*“What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN.
Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.”)*

In any case, as a result of the inherent “problems” with the “rabbinical system” in Jesus’ day, the Jewish “High Council” or the “Sanhedrin”, comprised of the chief priests and the elders – Pharisees or Sadducees all – took over the responsibility for ordination at which a man was declared to be not only a rabbi, but an elder and a judge, as well, and was, consequently, given the authority to:

-  **teach;**
-  **express wisdom; and**
-  **render verdicts.**

Admittedly, on the surface the procedure seems fair enough. After all, it was a “necessary safeguard” for “quality control”. So we shouldn’t be THAT surprised when the religious leaders (again, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who, normally, were bitter enemies, but out of their common fear of Jesus, the lowly carpenter from Nazareth), “joined forces” to approach Him as one unified body in the temple courts and demand of Him (St. Matthew 21:23b):

“By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”

Now had the religious leaders’ questions stemmed from:

-  **a deep concern for “the purity of the temple”; and**
-  **the integrity of the position of “rabbi”,**

there wouldn’t have been a “problem”.

But the truth was:

🗣️ **the religious leaders wanted their “territory”.**

The truth was:

🗣️ **they wanted to defend their “piece of turf”.**

However, the truth was:

🗣️ **they were more than a little “anxious” as to how to go about making their “case”,**

as evidenced by their terse – yet candid – admission in St. Matthew 21:26b:

“...we are afraid of the people...”.

Now, had the chief priests and the elders **really cared about the future of the Jewish nation**, they wouldn't have worried **at all** about what the people thought. Instead, they would have taken the matter of the Nazarene carpenter-turned-rabbi into their own hands, rather than eventually turning Jesus over to a foreign government (that is, the detested Romans) to deal with. In a nutshell, these so-called religious leaders hadn't learned the first lesson of leadership:

👤 **He who wants to lead the orchestra, must turn his back to the crowd.**



By the way, is it just me, or is there something **seriously wrong** with this **whole picture?!?** I mean, here we have:

- 🗨️ *The created questioning The Creator about His credentials;*
- 🗨️ *The pot querying The Potter regarding His qualifications; and*
- 🗨️ *Those who regularly twist words (as befit their twisted motivations) asking The Word of God for His "I.D." .*

No reference is made to any of Jesus' miracles. No question is raised about His teaching. Instead, the chief priests and the elders want to know about **Jesus' ordination**.

- 🗨️ **Did Jesus come out of the *right* seminary?**
- 🗨️ **Is Jesus a member of the *right* denomination?**
- 🗨️ **In short, does Jesus have the proper PREREQUISITES?**

It's rather incredible when we think about it: here we have mere people cross-examining **GOD**.

- 👊 **Mere people who suffer from the delusion that power means something. (*It doesn't.*)**
- 👉 **Mere people who suffer from the misconception that titles make a difference. (*They don't.*)**
- 👑 **Mere people under the impression that earthly authority will have a heavenly effect. (*It won't.*)**

In other words:

👥 *Mere people a lot like us.*

And to help illustrate my point, I would like us all to take this quick pop quiz:

- ✅ **Name the 4 wealthiest people in the world.**
- ✅ **Name the last 5 Academy Award winners for best picture.**
- ✅ **Name the last 6 winners of the Miss Canada pageant.**
- ✅ **Name 7 people who have won the Nobel Prize.**
- ✅ **Name the last 8 Stanley Cup winners.**

So how did we do? Not too well, I bet. (I know I flunked miserably, **and it was my quiz!**) With the possible exception of a few “Trivial Pursuit” experts out there, not too many of us remembers yesterday’s headliners very well. It’s rather surprising how quickly we forget, isn’t it? And what I included in my pop quiz are not exactly second-rate achievements – I mean, these people are (or were) **THE BEST** in their respective fields. Nevertheless:

-  **the applause dies;**
-  **awards tarnish;**
-  **accomplishments and achievements are forgotten; and**
-  **accolades and certificates are buried with their owners.**

Interestingly, King Solomon – to whom I alluded a few paragraphs ago – also affirmed this very point in Ecclesiastes 1:11:

*“No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.”*

And again in Ecclesiastes 2:16:

*“For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
in the days to come when both will be forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise too must die!”*

Moreover, this *“here today, gone tomorrow”* mindset – with respect to popularity, anyway – seems to have always been the case with humanity, as per my earlier quoting of King Solomon:

“...there is nothing new under the sun...”

So, I’ve come up with another quickie pop quiz. Let’s see how we fare on this one:

- ★ Name 4 people who taught you something worthwhile.
- ★ Name 5 heroes whose stories have inspired you.
- ★ Think of 6 people with whom you enjoy spending time.
- ★ List 7 teachers who aided your journey through school.
- ★ Name 8 people who helped you in a difficult time.

Now tell me, did you find this pop quiz to be somewhat easier? It was for me too. The lesson?

♥ **The people who make a difference are not the ones with the CREDENTIALS but, rather, the ones with the CONCERN.**

Chris Evert Lloyd, the former #1 female tennis player in the world, put it this way:

“The great high of winning Wimbledon lasts for about a week. You go down in the record book, but you don’t have anything tangible to hold on to. But having a baby – there isn’t any comparison.”

Let’s make no mistake about it:

- 🏆 worldly accomplishments are fleeting and momentary;
- ★ while Divine accomplishments – that is, those done in the Name of the Creator by those who have been created in His image – well, they last forever.



So much for **what led up to** today’s Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew, chapter 22. Now, let’s look specifically at the first three verses of today’s text (verses 15-17):

“The Pharisees made plans to trap Jesus in saying something wrong, ‘Teacher, we know that you are an honest man and that you teach the

truth about God's way. You are not afraid of what other people think about you, because you pay no attention to who they are. So tell us what you think. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Though, on the surface, their question might seem legitimate, both the Sadducees' and Pharisees' underlying motive is anything but valid:

 **Because their hearts are in the wrong place.**

For both the Sadducees and the Pharisees know that if:

 **Jesus advises the people *NOT TO PAY* their taxes to Rome, He will be in serious trouble with the Romans.**

On the other hand, if:

 **Jesus advises the people *TO PAY* their taxes to Rome, they will hate Him for being a sympathizer with the enemy.**

So either way, the Sadducees and Pharisees together reasoned, they couldn't lose. They had Jesus trapped. Hence, my earlier comment that of all the texts which drip with manipulation in Holy Scripture, this has to be one of THE WORST. Because God has made it clear in His Holy Word that flattery:

 **is never to be a tool of the sincere servant; and**
 **is nothing more than fancy dishonesty.**

It wasn't used by Jesus, nor should it be used by those who purport to follow Him. According to the Psalmist (Psalm 12:3a):

"May the Lord cut off all flattering lips..."

Not surprisingly, wise King Solomon (him again!) echoes the same sentiment in Proverbs 28:23:

“He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favour than he who has a flattering tongue.”

Granted, there are many times when Almighty God’s purposes are accomplished through the small gestures we perform but, more often, they are achieved **by the words we CHOOSE to use.**

👍 **Either way, though, the choice of what we do – or say – is always ours.**

For that is precisely what it means to be made in the “image of God”:

✋ **we have all been given the freedom to make choices; and**
👑 **God Himself has given us all the authority we need; but**
🗨️ **Almighty God has also given us all the responsibility for the choices we FREELY make – especially in how we choose to use our tongues.**



So, how about it?

Despite the fact that we will probably never have eight-year-old Mary “the intrepid-grace-reciting-prayer-warrior-girl” to lead us...

When push comes to shove (and it will – ON A DAILY BASIS in this world), will we choose:

⚠️ **by what we do,**

Or, more significantly:

💡 **by what we say,**

To render:

 unto Caesar,

Or:

 unto God?



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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