

COIN TRICK GETS JESUS OFF THE HOOK

Along about tax time every year we are tempted to turn to Jesus' famous quip about rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. You can find it in the Christian scriptures in any of the first three gospels, but the version at Mark 12:1-17 will do for starters.

The incident takes place during the last week of Jesus' life. It is located within the temple precincts at Jerusalem, where Jesus is wooing the admiring crowd and bantering with his opponents.

And getting himself into hot water.

The establishment officials are fed up with his shenanigans. Earlier in the week he had chased the concessionaires out of the ballpark. And his growing popularity with the pilgrims had the potential for raising a raucous in the streets.

So the leading religious and political factions send some folks to trip Jesus up. They lay it on thick. "Yes, sir," they begin, "you're some teacher. You call 'em the way you see 'em, and let the chips fall where they may."

It is a transparent lie, of course. They are merely trying to butter up the visiting rabbi and grease the skids for his downfall. "What do you think?" they continue. "Is it OK for us pay the poll tax, or not?"

This is a sensitive issue. Especially for Jews who live in Jerusalem in Jesus' day. Every year every adult had to plunk a silver denarius into the coffers of the Roman Emperor.

It was a grating reminder that the Jewish state was under the thumb of the imperial occupation troops.

Furthermore, the coin required for paying the tax was minted with a picture of the emperor himself plus the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus."

This was an insult to Jewish religious sensibilities. For their religion prohibited them from handling anything with human or divine images.

So Jesus' opponents think they have him between a rock and a hard place. If he answers, "Yes, go ahead and pay the tax," the people will turn on him. His popularity poll will plummet.

But if he says, "No, don't pay," the state authorities will have his scalp. Either way, he loses.

But Jesus has a knack for squirming out of tight spots. "Who do you think you're fooling?" he counters. "Does anybody have a coin? Let's take a look."

Right there he upsets the apple cart. The very folks who raise the tricky question about the imperial monies are the ones who just happen to have a few clinking in their pockets!

When they hand him one, Jesus flips the coin over. "Well, well, well! Whose face is this? And whose name?"

"Caesar's," his interlocutors answer. "Ok," comes the rabbi's rejoinder, "give Caesar his due. And pay God his due, too." With that he squelches his would-be tricksters and pockets the coin.

Well, maybe he didn't keep the coin. But he sure surprised the bystanders. The payoff was not merely that he got himself off the hook. The real bonus was that he gave the people a whole new way of looking at things.

That was the force of his remark about rendering to Caesar and to God. Jesus wasn't interested in making pronouncements about the separation of church and state. He was more interested in giving people a new slant on the ways of God and society.

Sometimes there are no easy answers. You still have to decide for yourself what belongs to God and what belongs to the world. This is precisely the point of Jesus' gentle irony.

Perhaps that is why this incident was remembered. It didn't provide a clear-cut answer to the church-state question. But by showing how Jesus turned the tables on that sort of tricky issue, it offered the possibility of a new perspective on the whole thing.

In other words, you don't have to get bogged down with things like earning your money and paying your taxes. You can live free, especially when your ultimate loyalties are not stuck on penultimate issues.

[FILE 52]