

## *Homily 29 Year A – Gospel Values*

The Gospel today reveals how astute Jesus was in his dealings with people. Two groups of Jews conspire together in an attempt to bring Jesus into disrepute, with the people or with the secular authorities.

One group is comprised of some **Pharisees** who regarded themselves as the rightful interpreters of God's law. Their position had been challenged by the words and actions of Jesus - by the priorities he held, and by the company he kept. They wanted to diminish his standing - the respect in which he was held by the mass of the people, his popularity and influence.

The other group were the **Herodians** – that is, those who associated themselves with the Jewish King Herod who collaborated with the Roman occupation and who was thereby able to retain a semblance of political power and an eminent social status.

Normally these two groups would be attacking each other, but for the time being they put their differences aside to launch a two-pronged attack on Jesus. Their question - *Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* - is a clever one because it puts Jesus on the horns of a dilemma.

If Jesus says: 'No, you shouldn't pay' then he would be a big hit with the people, but in big trouble with the Roman authorities. But if he says: 'Yes, you should' then he would certainly diminish the esteem in which the people held him.

Jesus sees the trap immediately and cleverly sidesteps the question, throwing another back at them which they can only answer in the way that gives him the opportunity to make his famous riposte: *Give to Caesar what belongs to him; and to God what belongs to God.*

Typically, Jesus does not make a **ruling**. He didn't go in for that kind of thing. Instead, and as usual, He states a **principle** – a proposition that his hearers are challenged to **apply for themselves**. From Him we learn Gospel Values, but living them out is up to us, although we believe His Spirit will guide us and support us in the community of the Church. There are many examples.

Jesus teaches us of the importance of marriage. He urges life-long faithfulness in a special relationship in which earnest effort and the grace of God can enable the partners to bring out the best in each other and grow in their ability to love. There are shining examples of such achievements in every Christian community.

In recent times sociological studies have demonstrated time and again the importance of monogamy to the health and stability of society. Married people and the children of married people live longer; married men and women are less prone to mental health problems. Surveys have even discovered that men with a loving wife have a more fulfilling sex life than men with casual partners.

Because some marriages fail this should not diminish the regard we have for this formerly revered institution, rather it behoves us to do more to support it in every way we can: financially, legally, culturally. It is important for Christians to be critical of those prevailing social attitudes and of any government policy which undermine marriage. Instead every effort should be made to help people to prepare for and to sustain their married life.

Jesus in the Gospel stories clearly regards children as precious and to be at the heart of the life of the community of his followers. Christians have always looked upon the marital union as being the most promising setting for the healthy upbringing of children. The attitude - widespread today in our increasingly secular society - that regards children as a burden and liability rather than as a gift and an asset should be challenged. Investment in children should be a cornerstone of government policy, evident in a host of practical provisions.

In Christian tradition the family is seen as encouraging a spirit of interdependence. Newlyweds look after each other; they then look after their children. Then their children grow up and (hopefully) look after them. This self reliance of the family unit should make welfare and social services less necessary. It fosters a culture in which the weak, the infirm, and the elderly are not abandoned or handed over to others but instead are cared for primarily within the family circle. This still happens, of course, in the so-called 'undeveloped' or 'developing' countries.

Moreover this family spirit, if generously put into practice, enhances our sense of responsibility for those not immediately related to us, but who are our 'brothers and sisters' nonetheless – that is, in the human family at large. Catholic Social Doctrine, deriving directly from Gospel Values, puts forward criteria for government policy (and a measure for our own attitudes) towards such issues as a just wage, welfare tax, immigration, and foreign policy.

'Am I my brother's keeper?' asks Cain in the story of Genesis. Jesus gives us the answer in his every word and deed. The Church endeavours to promote practical application of his foundational principles.

Jesus' teaching is never out of date and can be addressed to a variety of different situations and to a succession of historical circumstances. But we have to realise the importance of his Gospel Values, for our welfare and happiness as individuals, families, and for society as a whole – national and international. When we do not live in accordance with his teaching and example we are on the way to disorder and distress – personally and collectively.