

Sat., Dec. 3, 2011

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Scripture

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Devotional

"But Jesus, aware of malice"

Ok, this is Advent, and malice is not a particular theme well suited to the lights, foil wrap, carefully crafted snowflakes Scotch-taped to grade school windows. Malice does not sync up with the gentle guitar-accompaniment of *Away in the Manger*, the babe asleep in the hay.

And yet, here it is in this text—and it draws *my* attention at least—and compels me in an odd and certain way to sit and meditate upon its meaning. Malice—the words of the lawyer in court, the scolding of an angry parent to a wayward teen, the words of a sports fan about his football team's loss. (I am in Steeler country here!)

There is a malicious mood in the land these days: dark, troublesome, and fierce. It filters down into our psyches, spills over into family conversations and our workaday worlds and becomes stuck in the recesses of our deepest fears. Malice sticks to us like super glue—and we cannot get it off the fingers of our faith. We have become malicious about what we believe and why we believe it. We reek havoc in the name of God.

This passage moves from malice to taxes. Whoa Nelly—as the saying goes—this is the battle royal of our own national politics right here in the Gospel of Matthew. Why pay taxes, and who should pay taxes and for what purpose? What are the ethics of tax management? We as a nation cannot agree on the answer.

Into this mix, then Jesus, risks a response. Jesus is savvy: the goal was entrapment—another legal word of note. His steely mind and steady presence yields an answer. The powers that be leave in silence and amazement. They have no retort, no rebuttal, it is a national debate on CNN on wrong. The entertainment value for ratings plunges. What will bring it back: such action will take time, what will be needed is a calculated strategy for what is at stake. Power, position, the trappings of the elite, private jets, for example, or rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous, and a portfolio immune from economic turmoil—all of this is what is to be protected.

In Advent we discover that the narrative of Jesus offered to us from the beginning penetrates our propensities to seek power, position, prestige.

It is too much to ask of us and yet this gospel asks. It is not the words that count—it is what we do with the words.

Prayer

May the power of this text give us pause. Open our minds and hearts to transformation possible only through the Spirit. Amen.