



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Faith-based Hypocrites"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Isaiah 45: 1-7
Epistle 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10
Gospel Matthew 22: 15-22

"Give to Cæsar what belongs to Cæsar, and to God what belongs to God." Those words spoken by Jesus in today's Gospel are much more dangerous than they might sound. Imagine our Lord's position as he said that: the enemies of Jesus and those who were collaborators with the Roman occupation were joining forces to put him in a delicate position. Paying taxes was a political statement for the 1st century Jew: it was a sign of submission to a foreign power. The question that Jesus' "smarmy" enemies pose is dynamite. If Jesus refuses to pay the tax, he is on the side of the insurrectionists. If he supports the tax, he compromises his religious integrity.

Our Lord's response is angry: "You hypocrites!" He knows that those who ask this question have already compromised their own beliefs in one way or another. Using these questions to trap Jesus is both dishonest and unfair. We know this because the passage for today tells us that this was all planned.

"You hypocrites!" our Lord cries, and then catches his enemies in their own trap by asking them for a Roman coin. They immediately respond, giving Jesus a clear sign that they themselves are carrying around the little silver symbol of Rome's conquest of Palestine and also of the emperor's claim to divinity. They are, to use the

American street slang, "so busted." And Jesus ends his defense by sharing the principle of his own balance between Church and State: each deserves its support, but God remains God: in a category of his own and as a moral standard above all earthly claims of loyalty.

The issue of Church and State is still with us, here in these early years of a century for which some forecasted the death of organized religion. Not only do we see the resurgence of militant Islam opposed to a secular West, but we also see the emergence of a militant evangelicalism in the United States that affects elections and appointments. Only this week I read a Washington Post editorial critical of the perceived hypocrisy of religious factions in the battle over new Supreme Court nominees. When religious persons are attacked by the left, the editorial observed, the right protests that religion should not be an issue in appointments. But the administration seems to have no qualms about using a person's evangelical credentials to gain support.

But we don't have to go any further than our own backyard to find the use and abuse of religion. Evangelical leaders, some of them seriously compromised, are part of every political rally here, and God knows that the Catholic Church dances rings around the alleged separation of Church and State in the Philippines. Bishops, trying to recapture the star-quality of Cardinal Sin, march for the opposition. Masses are celebrated in shopping malls to help tempt shoppers to spend money they don't really have. We are painfully aware of this even in our own neighborhood where we must constantly remind the authorities that there are *two* churches in Forbes Park, and where only *one* of them gets preferential treatment by law enforcement and the press.

So what is a thinking Christian to do?

The answer is to keep an open and critical mind. God's ways are not our ways, and any attempt to fit God into political parties or national interests is doomed to failure. He will not play our silly, selfish games. There is no *utang na loob* in heaven. In

addition, he is perfectly capable of using people who are not recognizably religious, at least in our way of thinking, for his purposes.

A case in point is found in today's first reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. It begins by addressing not a pious, Jewish ruler, but the king of the Persian Empire, Cyrus the Great. His religion was Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic faith based on ancient Indo-European beliefs and molded by the prophet Zarathushtra. By all reports, this Cyrus was an enlightened ruler, admired by those of many nations and a personal hero to no less than Alexander the Great. He was not a Jew by any stretch of the imagination, let alone a Christian. And yet, we are told that he is a "messiah", an anointed one, chosen by God to work his will on the stage of world history. He has been called by God, *our God*, to do the things he did, especially since these included allowing the peoples of his empire to return to the religions of their own nations. This allowed for the return of the exiles to the Promised Land and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. And these things were done not by a member of the so-called "only true religion," but by a pagan king who nevertheless is called "anointed by God".

The moral of this is that religious affiliation is no guarantee of being God's chosen instrument, but only an attitude of openness to God's will. We should be very skeptical of evangelists, bishops or even presidents who wear their religion on their sleeves like Scout merit badges and who court the support of the masses by cynically using the Churches to meet very political goals. "Faith-based Hypocrites" the Post article called them. And Jesus would probably agree- at least he seems to in today's Gospel reading.

Being a conservative evangelical doesn't automatically mean that one is in tune with God's will, nor does being a liberal secularist forbid God to use you for the good of the world and its people. Being a Catholic doesn't mean that one is immune to corruption. Being a Protestant doesn't mean one embraces a "culture of death" when it comes to family planning. It's just not that simple.

John Danforth, former U.S. senator and ambassador to the United Nations, in addition to being an Episcopal priest, speaking at a recent gathering at the National Cathedral in Washington, put it this way: "When people believe that they're fighting a religious battle, nothing is more energizing than 'I'm on God's side.' But there's also nothing more divisive than that. Because once you believe that you're on God's side, therefore people who disagree with you are not on God's side, or are even enemies of God. There's no room for the ...stuff of politics. And there's a lot of room for real hatred and animosity and bitterness. [] You may disagree with everything [those in your opposition] say and every position they take and every candidate they support, but they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and they too read the Bible and they too try to be faithful."

Christians ought to be active in their communities, pay their legitimate taxes and work for the good of the society in which they find themselves. But doing so responsibly means being mature in discerning where faith ends and where pure politics begin. "Give back to Cæsar what belongs to Cæsar- and to God what belongs to God." But for heaven's sake, be aware of the difference. And ask yourself while being active in your local community, who it is that deserves the deeper loyalty.