

2020 29th SUNDAY

Today's Gospel is sometimes used as a virtual Magna Carta on proper Church-State relations. I hear myself muttering from time to time, "What right have politicians to tell the Church how we should run our affairs?" And yet politicians sometimes say the same thing about Church officials. "What right have they to tell us how to run the country?"

There is a myth that when Jesus said: "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar... and to God what belongs to God" that Jesus was saying that Church and State must strictly compartmentalise areas of interest and stay widely apart from each other.

It is true that Jesus did not involve Himself overly much with the pressing political question of His time... the Roman occupation of Palestine. Jesus was not a member of the Zealot Party. In today's Gospel he seems to be encouraging people to pay their taxes to the Romans. Was He trying to defuse the tensions in Judaism by including among His inner circle both a Zealot and a tax-collector?

But it would be false to thereby conclude that Jesus had no interest in politics. He had a flaming thirst for justice. As is recorded in Luke's Gospel: "God has sent Me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free." Jesus was concerned about how power was used. He blazed against the Pharisees: "Alas for you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites- you pay your tithe of mint and dill and cumin and neglect the weighty matters of law- justice, mercy and good faith."

The Church must be faithful to Christ and speak out for the oppressed and challenge those who trample over the rights of the powerless. This means political comment. The Church must involve herself in justice matters be it Workers' rights, questions of unemployment, questions of racial or gender inequality, questions of resource sharing or climate change effects.

As Christians we believe that God has the first and highest claim on our loyalty. Our most precious possession is our conscience. Our dignity as humans lies in observing the law inscribed in our hearts by God. But conscience is not a free- for-all. The wise person will be guided in the formation of conscience by the wisdom of the Church. We believe that God's Spirit lives in the Church and guides her in her teaching role. We have much to

learn from the Church because it reflects the mind of Christ. It has profound social teachings which should help form our consciences.

Incidentally, today after Mass we will be highlighting some of the Church's social justice teachings in our Parish quiz. I hope you are able to come! It should be fun.

Jesus also instructs us to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. We must respect and obey the laws of our country and be involved in the democratic process. I hope all of us, who are permitted, have voted.

Today, too, we have our Mission Sunday collection right throughout the Church. The collection supports missionaries in the 932 mission dioceses throughout the world. By contributing generously, we become part of the outreach of the Church in the 3rd world. By identifying with the poor in these countries the Church frequently alienates those in power. Faithful to Christ, the Church needs people of the 1st world to contribute generously on such days as today.

Pope Francis in his message to the Church for World Mission Day 2020 concludes with these words: "The celebration of World Mission Day is an occasion for reaffirming how prayer, reflection and the material help of your offerings are so many opportunities to participate actively in the mission of Jesus in His Church. The charity expressed in the collections is aimed at supporting the missionary work carried out in my name by the Pontifical Mission societies, in order to meet the spiritual and material needs of peoples and churches throughout the world, for the salvation of all."

During my years as a missionary in Kiribati I came to appreciate the importance of the Mission Sunday collection. Bishop Paul Mea was my next door neighbour. He and the diocese had very little to come and go on. The majority of his Catholics survived by going out fishing in their canoes every day and cultivating their gardens. There was very little money for the plate at Sunday Mass. When the Mission Sunday cheque arrived, the Bishop would have a smile a mile wide. This enabled him to bring his priests in from the outer Islands for their annual Retreat and for a time of formation. It enabled him to support the Village Catechists and to see that the Churches and Schools of the Diocese were maintained. It gave everyone hope and confidence.

So please give what you can on this Mission Sunday.

