

For the last three weeks, Jesus has put the chief priests and the elders in their place – saying the kingdom of heaven will be taken from them -- and given to a people who will produce *good fruit*. . .

Usually everyone knows that when you get three strikes – you're out. . .

So perhaps it's because the Pharisees lived way before the invention of baseball – or because they weren't paying attention to what Jesus was saying – or *they were just plain stubborn* – because the Jewish leaders come at Jesus again this week, and will come at him again next week ---

trying to discredit him before the vast crowds who are listening to him – and not to them.

The next week Jesus will take a final swipe at the scribes and Pharisees --- and then Jesus will tell a few stories preparing us for the end of time – and then, listen up folks, THEN IT'S ADVENT! So buckle up – because the next few weeks are going to fly by. . .

So this week the Jewish leaders – who are anti-Cesar, because they don't like being an oppressed people -- - team up with the Herodians – who are pro-Cesar because they are part of the ruling class of the Roman Empire ---- to set a trap for Jesus by asking him about Roman Taxes --- whether or not they should be paid. . .

No matter how Jesus answers, he is going to alienate one of these groups --- thereby losing face with some of the crowds following him – or so the Pharisees and Herodians think. . .

Jesus, of course, understands completely that they are trying to trap him – and so will have none of it. The tone of his speech in the originally Aramaic indicates his disgust with them --- here it is translated as “you hypocrites” which is a very tame translation.

Jesus' answer simply indicates that there are two realms – two spheres of influence -- in which his followers live ---

the world (that is the realm of Cesar – or whatever the secular society is at the time) and the spiritual (that is the realm of God).

We Christians are in the world and so are bound by the rules of the world. BUT we are also the chosen of God – and so are part of something much greater than the world – and so are bound by the Laws of God as well. We need to pay service to both.

In the early Church, the letters of St. Paul show that Paul was very careful to tell the new Christians to live as good citizens. He, too, saw the need to live in the world as it was, and not be put into a situation where they could be criticized and look bad.

Of course what should be bothersome to us all is when there might be a clash between the rules of the nation and the rules of God.

Because of our democratic process we can vote to follow our beliefs – but since we know God's ways are not always the world's ways and Christians are not the only ones voting --- the vote doesn't always go the way of God.

Issues of abortion and reproduction, immigration, the death penalty, slavery, and war --- have all been issues that have collided with Christian values. Who is right – and who is wrong??

With some issues, like slavery, the political process was ahead of the Church on the issue – and it was Church thinking that changed as a result. Few of us would read about slavery in the Bible today – and try to justify it as an accepted practice based on Biblical interpretation. . . although that was the certainly the case in the past: the Bible approved of slavery, and so it must be okay. . .

Other good questions arise around whether Christians have a duty to impose their ethics and morality on the majority of Americans. We must follow the laws of our country and render unto Caesar – but we CAN work to change people's minds on issues or show them a better way by our example.

Or, perhaps the democratic will is just --- and the theological interpretations may change.

Whatever the case, it doesn't always seem to be as simple as Jesus' answer might indicate – or perhaps it is. . . Perhaps we are to follow the laws of our country, and live our own lives according to God's law – not judging others on their different values or ideas.

All interesting things to think about – and pray about. Or how about this thought --

In the first reading from Isaiah – we hear of Cyrus, the Lord's anointed leader of Persia, who had conquered the Israelites. . .

So Cyrus – was not Jewish – yet God was able to use him to widen people's understanding of the one, true God – and to bring glory to himself and the Jewish people. . .

Perhaps God also uses secular leaders to help us understand modifications in our religious thinking which we might be ready for. . . Abraham Lincoln, who some claim wasn't a devout Christian – certainly wasn't a practicing one --- changed a lot of people's minds and hearts about slavery---- and his strong belief eventually paid off both in American life and eventually in our theological understanding.

God works in many ways – “there is none beside him and there is no other” – as Isaiah says.

In this coming week, let's not be afraid to challenge some of our beliefs that may not align with social values of the world. Let us read Scripture and hear God talking to us – and be challenged by its words. And know that whether we are rendering to Caesar or unto God ----- that all things will someday be one – and God shall reign – that is our Christian hope and our Christian belief.

And that is the Good News we take refuge in --when we are troubled by all that goes on in the world around us.