

Trinity XXIII Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Heads I win, tails you lose, so goes the common joke or trick.

And it is a similar thing that the Pharisees and Herodians are trying to do to Jesus in our Gospel reading. These two parties were arch-rivals within Judaism, but they could agree on one thing: Jesus was dangerous, a threat to their power, and therefore must be stopped at all costs. The Pharisees were patriots, who deeply resented the pagan occupation and rule of the Holy Land. They resisted the influence and dominance of Roman custom and rule, and they sought to keep themselves pure. The Herodians saw the Pharisees as puritans.

They preferred to seek to cooperate with their Roman rulers, in an attempt to improve their lot and the lot of their people. The puritans and the pragmatists, it is a classic conflict, each group regarding the other as religious fanatics or disloyal compromisers.

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They think they have our Lord between a rock and hard place, asking him to take a stand on paying taxes. His answer partly affirms both positions. The Herodians are right, a faithful Jew can and should pay his due to the Roman authorities (Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's). And yes, the Pharisees are correct, our duty to God is everything and primary (and render to God the things that are God's). But there is also a rebuke to both parties here. The Pharisees had to learn that the limited and finite duties of such earthly citizenship were not contrary to, but a part of, their duty to God. And the Herodians had to be reminded of their primary loyalty to the Lord God.

Jesus implies that they and we have a dual citizenship, earthly and heavenly. At times, there is no conflict between these, but we must remember that they do at other times come into the strongest of conflict, especially as they did for countless early Christians.

Precisely because they refused to give Caesar what is God's, in

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refusing to acknowledge him as a god and to worship him, early Christians were put to death.

When Paul then says that our commonwealth - our citizenship - is in heaven, he is speaking to a people who, for the most part, were not citizens. They did not have the status and rights of citizenship, but rather lived in this world as second or third-class citizens. Our common wealth, our Christian treasure, is in heaven. To the poor, to the dispossessed, to the downtrodden, this is Good News. Our citizenship is in heaven. To those who do not belong and who do not fit in, this is Good News.

Our citizenship, our real and fundamental and eternal belonging, is in heaven, and so here on earth we are strangers and pilgrims. Sometimes we live much more like tourists and vacationers, here for a good time, not a long time, and this is to our shame. Worse than that, some of us get so comfortable in our Egyptian bondage, that we don't want to go to the Promised Land,

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and we forfeit our stake on the other side of Jordan. The point of our readings today is that you belong to God, so give him his due. You belong in heaven, so live like that, on earth as in heaven. Here we have no lasting home, no abiding city. We look and hope for that eternal home and heavenly city.

And the very name of our gathering as Christians reminds us of this truth. We are a Parish, and “Parish” means simply those who are homeless, those away from home. We are all together on a journey home. And this Church is meant to be an embassy of heaven set up on earth. This is to be a place where all peoples may come to seek that heavenly citizenship, where we gather to proclaim that we belong to God, where we affirm that citizenship, hear of its news and prepare for our journey home.

To live as citizens of heaven, as those whose common wealth, riches and land that belong to all, is in heaven, while we are still here on earth, is what we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer. To worship, to

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live under God's rule, and to do God's will here on earth as it is done in heaven, to receive and to share bread and forgiveness on earth as in heaven, and to be free from temptation and evil. This life as members of Christ, children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, means that we look to heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The struggle for us is to keep this focus, not to sell our birthright, our pledged inheritance, for a bowl of soup. But we get lost in despair and confusion. And we get discouraged because we have minds set on earthly things, and we forget the joy and glory set before us. We need to be heavenly minded, over and over again reminded of that reward and joy and hope and life and purpose and end.

Now all this may sound too much like pie in the sky to you. But you know, those who don't care for pie in the sky, are those who have had their fill on earth. But for those left out, those excluded,

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those who do not get their share, here and now, for them pie in the sky, just desserts, a reward and a justice and a life and a meaning and a joy and peace in the sky, sounds pretty good. For if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But Christ is risen from the dead. We have a hope, a home, a place and an inheritance reserved in heaven for us by him. He is the one who died for us and rose again for us and ascended into heaven for us, that we might receive the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, through him and for his sake.

Have you ever noticed the things that immigrants, refugees and minorities strive to hold onto? They look for news from home, they keep their language long after learning the local tongue, and they maintain their national home-cooking.

We are citizens of heaven. We need to pore over and treasure every word from heaven, especially the Good News of our Saviour Jesus Christ. We need to maintain our language, the language of

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worship and prayer. And we need to be recalled to our homeland by our national dish, the holy communion, a taste of home, of a home and country where all are equal citizens in Jesus Christ. A place where, as children of the one Father of us all in the Holy Spirit, all nations and peoples and languages and races are joined in the kingdom and worship of the Lord God.

In all your troubles and distresses, in your pain and sorrow, in the face of injustice and disappointment, sickness and the finality of death, I plead with you to look up to heaven. Remember where you really belong, and rejoice. For great is your reward in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, who was born as one of us and died for all of us, that we might be adopted and redeemed. He made us the forgiven children of our heavenly Father, to whom, with the Son and life-giving Spirit, be praise and thanks in this house and assembly, and in the home and gathering of heaven, for ever and ever. Amen.