

Pentecost 22
October 15 & 16, 2005
Sermon

The Creator made all things good, but from the outset Evil usurped power, and now the universe is a battleground between good and evil. Only the High Priest can keep evil at bay and usher in the Reign of God. Our hero is given the choice, a choice between two High Priests, and he must pick one. There's only one catch: both choices are wrong. It could be the plot for a fantasy novel, but instead it is the setting for our reading from the Gospel According to St Matthew. In Jesus' day the High Priest in Jerusalem was called Caiaphas. Once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, which this year was Thursday October 13) Caiaphas would don the High Priestly vestments, enter the holiest place in the Temple, and carry out a complex sacrificial ritual to atone for the sins of Israel and maintain the cosmic balance. It was in this Temple that Jesus' confrontation took place. That temple was just one of many in the Roman Empire. The Romans too believed that evil and chaos had to be held at bay. They had emerged as a peaceful and stable empire only after decades of civil wars and assassinations. The person who brought cosmic stability was so important that his name and picture were everywhere. Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus (Latin for High Priest). This was the image on the coin that the Pharisees handed to Jesus.

So Jesus had a choice. If he said no to paying Caesar's tax he was a threat to national security, to the cosmic balance. If Jesus told the people to pay Caesar's

tax he was rebelling against the Hebrew High Priest—he was aligning with foreigners *against* God and Israel. It was a trap. The Pharisees and Herodians were the conspirators, but they were puppets in the hands of Sin. Sin traps each of us. It tries to force us to make choices like the one Jesus had to make. We like to think that we have a free will and can choose whatever we want, but we don't; Sin has a hold of our will. It plays with us, turning us against each other and against God. We know that something is wrong, but Sin so permeates us that it makes us think that we can fix the problem ourselves. "If only we have enough faith everything will be fine." It's a bogus claim, made by a bogus power that gave Jesus two bogus High Priests and said "Pick one."

Friends of Christ, there is but one High Priest, and that is Jesus the Christ. A priest is by definition someone who can approach God, ask for forgiveness, pray for self and others, and tell others what God has done. We who are sinners could never do these things, so God does them for us. God knows that Sin has trapped us, and God loves each of us so much that God will do anything to free us and reunite us with God. We see this in Jesus the Christ. God reaches out and breaks the bonds of Sin. God raises Jesus the Christ imperishable, and draws Jesus the Christ into God's presence, and in doing this God makes Christ the High Priest. God approaches God on our behalf through Christ. That's a tough, mystical concept, and it is at the core of our faith: God gives us the priest, and now God is no longer unapproachable. Friends of Christ, God has freed us and made *us* able to approach God, ask for forgiveness, pray, and tell others about what God has done.

We're not all called to the Ordained Ministry of Word and Sacrament as Pastor Mary and I are, but we are all priests. When we baptize little Megan Jane we will anoint her with oil as a sign that she too is a priest in Christ's Church. Make no mistake. She is a priest. You are a priest.

We're all priests, and yet we all have other occupations. We have to figure out just how to live our Christian priestly vocation in our worldly vocation. For this God has created the Church, the assembly of the priesthood of all believers, as the place in which God can shape us to discern our call. Here in the Church we feed on the Word and Sacraments. Here in the Church we pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance. Here in the Church, with the help of all the priests of Christ, ordained pastors and laypeople alike, we can discern the priestly work to which God is calling us, so that our Christian vocation does not take a back seat to our work, but rather is the heart and soul of our work. Christ is alive in us, not just when we sit in the pews here, but when we leave for work in the morning. Christ is alive in us, not just when we pray privately, but when we interact with others. Christ is alive in us, not only at certain times and in certain places, but at all times and in all places, in everything we do, in our jobs, in our families, in every facet of our existence. All of it belongs to God. We belong to God. We are God's priests, forgiven and empowered by the faith of Christ the High Priest.

So what does the High Priest have to say to the two pretenders? Many of us have his reply memorized, in some form or another. "Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give back to God the things that are God's." On the

one hand, give back to Caesar what is his. We live in this world and our calling is to a priesthood that works in this world. We cannot segregate ourselves from the world. It is our mission field. We're called to live in society and shape society. On the other hand, God ultimately owns it all. Sin usurped the universe, but it is God's. It might be a battlefield, but God's reign has already begun and God's victory over Sin and Death has already been won and is sealed to us in the resurrection. As we live in this world with our Priestly vocation as the heart and soul of all that we do, we work to give it back. Approach God on behalf of others. Give it back. Ask for forgiveness because it is yours. Give it back. Pray with confidence for yourself and others. Give it back. Tell people what God has done for you. Give it back. Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your friends and your enemies as you love yourself. Give what Sin has stolen back to God. Give glory to God who saves us from the power of Sin, who raises us anew every day as priests in Christ's Church and who, on the last day, will raise us as Christ was raised into the full presence of God. Be a priest. Walk in the faith of the Christ, crucified and risen. Amen.