



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE TWENTY-FIRST
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

OCTOBER 22, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Sometime in the mid-eighties a woman by the name of Mary Rahe was an applicant for a new FM radio station in Mary Esther. She was a client of my firm. There were a number of other applicants, and before any hearing took place at the Federal Communications Commission another applicant offered her \$250,000 to dismiss her application, which she did. No secrets here. This is all public record.

Mary Rahe at the time also was managing Breakers East, just down the road from us here. When we needed a convenient place for a brief honeymoon 37 years ago, we called her. And that is why and how we got here, trooping into our narthex with five children in tow on August 24, 1986. Whether this has any relevance to the lessons from the Gospel according to Matthew this morning will be left to our imaginations and musings.

But another case our firm handled for a radio station applicant involved a word that bears a close connection to Jesus' interrogation by the Pharisees and Herodians. In 1984, a young man named Danny Dean came to our firm to file an application for a new noncommercial FM station in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Within the appointed time a number of so-called competing applications were filed, among them one by Jimmy Swaggart Ministries.

To determine who would be awarded the license for the station, the FCC would conduct a hearing. A critical part of the pre-hearing process was the discovery phase, when the contesting parties exchanged documents and conducted depositions and did anything else that would run up the legal fees - God bless us. The hearing process was a game of attrition.

But among the documents exchanged by Jimmy Swaggart Ministries was their Articles of Incorporation. One provision stated that Jimmy Swaggart Ministries was "sovereign" over its affairs and undertakings. In effect they were saying that - as sovereignty is defined - they would make their decisions and take action independently, without any outside interference or accountability. In the realm of their ministry, they would be the supreme and ultimate authority or power. I do not recall ever getting a satisfactory explanation from their witnesses as to what that assertion of sovereignty would mean if the government required them to do something they

considered contrary to their moral or ethical obligations as a Christian ministry.

Which does pose the question for us, who is sovereign in our lives. Because that, too, is the issue in the Gospel this morning. Every moment of the day, we must ask ourselves that question: who or what is sovereign in our lives.

Jesus' Jewish followers knew exactly what Jesus meant in his answer. We owe God everything. We owe Caesar nothing. Paying taxes to Rome admitted the validity or sovereignty of Augustus and, thus, they saw it as an insult to God. Only God could be sovereign.

We might note that Jesus outed the loyalties of his inquisitors in asking them to show him a coin. Their showing they had in their possession in the Temple a Roman coin with an inscription calling the emperor divine would have only confirmed their true fealty to Rome and marked them as collaborators in their occupation and taxation.

History is littered with this tension between the sovereignty of God versus the sovereignty of nations and governments. Thomas Becket, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by Henry II, was murdered in his cathedral because he placed his loyalty to God over his loyalty to the king. We are here as Episcopalians because Henry VIII four centuries later assumed sovereignty over the Church. Thomas More refused to take the oath of Supremacy to Henry VIII and was beheaded. Among his last words: "I die the King's good servant, and God's first."

Today, King Charles remains the head of the Church of England. But the American Revolution put an end to the unity of Church and State in our country. The United States was founded as a nation under God, but with no established state religion and with constitutionally protected religious freedom.

In the 1989 motion picture *The Russia House*, Barley Blair, played by Sean Connery tells Katya Orlova, his Russian lover, portrayed by Michelle Pfeiffer, "You are my only country now."¹

When I tell Jo that, though, it is always with the expressed or implicit qualification that she is my only country, "after God." Fortunately, we share the same faith and nearly identical worldviews. So that priority of sovereignties is rarely tested. But for a rather spoiled, only child, it is an

¹ *The Russia House*, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100530/quotes/?ref=tt_trv_quote (accessed October 16, 2023).

ongoing struggle. As we might suspect, it is for all of us in one way or another.

Do we value some relationships more than we value our loyalty to God? Do we refuse forgiveness and value our righteous indignation more than we value God's command to love? Do we embrace human justice – you get what you deserve – or God's justice that says everyone should have enough? Because the opposite of God's justice is not God's mercy. The opposite of God's justice is human injustice. Do we invoke our misguided sense of personal sovereignty, or do we acknowledge that we cannot exercise complete control over our own lives? That we live in a world that is not our own, but God's. A cosmos where God is sovereign. Not the state. Not the Church. Not even the individual, despite the proclamations and proclivities of our western culture to value independence and self-sufficiency?

But do we have to pay our taxes then if we owe God everything? Jesus did not answer that question directly. He couldn't. Had he said to pay Roman taxes he would have alienated his followers, who bitterly resented and often resisted paying them. On the other hand, if he said not to pay them, he would have been arrested and likely crucified immediately by the Romans for counseling a refusal to pay taxes.

Where does that leave us today? We are first citizens of heaven. We have responsibilities to the Kingdom of God. We not only pray God's kingdom come in the Lord's prayer, but also have an obligation to hasten its coming. Yet, we also are citizens of nations. Given our preeminent obligation to God, what obligation do we have to our country?

Lincoln called our unique expression of democracy a government "of the people, by the people, for the people." That underscores our accountability for the actions of our government. That means as followers of Christ whose first loyalty is to God, we are obligated to be informed and involved. That means it would be irresponsible to leave governance to those who are "selfish, self-seeking, partisan, and ungodly." Although I must say that one of the most decent, reasonable, and honorable subcommittee chairs, I dealt with was at the time the only avowed atheist in Congress. Still, surrendering the power to govern to those who set aside Christ's dictates of love, compassion, peace, justice, and mercy, would be reckless, arguably unpatriotic, and a failure of Christian duty.

And, sorry, but Jesus hardly suggested we not pay taxes. After all, governments typically do a lot for their people – some better than others. And usually things that only a government can do, like provide for national defense and law enforcement, build highways and schools and parks, and provide safety nets for the aged and the needy. Things we cannot do as individuals. But every citizen owes their support via taxes to the government that fulfills its obligation to its country and its people.

So we are dual citizens, and sometimes that means facing some challenging questions when a clash develops between the obligations of those concurrent citizenships. Jesus did not speak to that directly. He just left us our consciences.² As informed his example. And the Holy Spirit. And our memories, reason, and skill. And to the counsel and advice of our communities of those who are faithful to him and faithful to us.

So Jesus equipped us to do what he said. Render unto God what is God's. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Surely, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We just need to look where we are going.

Here's the epilog on that FM station in Baton Rouge. It confirmed my theory that applicants who thought God wanted them to get the station would be reluctant to settle a case if it involved dismissing their applications. But after nearly 20 years of litigation, the case was settled in 2003 – when our client Danny Dean was offered \$250,000 to dismiss its application. Pure coincidence. And happily he was able to pay his lawyer.

Jimmy Swaggart Ministries still owns WJSM, 88.5 FM in Baton Rouge. WYZB, Mary Esther, 105.5 FM currently is one of over 400 stations owned by Cumulus Media. Mary Rahe would outlive Danny Dean by 14 years. He died at 43 in 2006. Had he prevailed, he probably never would have seen the station he wanted. May they both rest in peace.

² Anyone who in good conscience refuses to pay taxes should consider it an act of civil disobedience for which they would be accountable.