

We live in an interesting and disturbing time don't we? The issues and events of the past six weeks (Hurricane Ike, global economic crisis, layoffs at U.T.M.B., presidential election campaign) have changed our lives. We will never be the same. Much of the stuff of our past has been ripped out of our hands. The future before us seems very uncertain. We are living from day to day as if we are in a dream, sorting out paper work and rumors of help, living out of suitcases, waiting for electricity or phone service to be restored, trying to stay connected to others and to remain grounded in reality. What is reality, anyway?

The incident recorded in today's Gospel reading might point us toward a reality in which we can find a footing and form a perspective that will orient us in relation to the past, the present, and the future.

The Pharisees and the Herodians sent their followers to Jesus with a question that was intended to entrap him. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If he said, "yes" the Pharisees would have Jesus on theological grounds. If he said, "no" the Herodians would have him on political grounds. Either way, this was a foolproof game of "gotcha."

But Jesus turned the tables and caught them in their own trap. He asked them to show him the coin used for the tax. Of course, it bore the image of the Emperor, revered by many of his subjects as a deity. Jesus asked them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

What was so amazing? They couldn't fault Jesus' for his assertion that the Roman money belonged to the emperor. And as faithful Jews, they couldn't fault him for reminding them that the whole earth and everything in it belong to God. So Jesus points beyond their reality to a greater reality: from the reality of what is ours to whose are we, from the reality of what we give away to the reality of what we keep.

Yesterday's Houston Chronicle carried an interesting interview with Cardinal Daniel DiNardo who is in Rome attending a synod regarding the role of the Bible in the lives of Roman Catholics. The reporter asked the Cardinal how he responded to those who use the Bible to defend their stance on the teaching of evolution or intelligent design. Cardinal DiNardo responded by saying that "the Bible tells us the 'why' of things." He emphasizes that there is a distinction between science and theology or philosophy.

Meteorology is the science of weather, explaining how the weather works. Economics attempts to explain how the economy works. Political science is about how the political process works. Physics is about how the physical universe works. What our faith does is provide for our minds and our souls a way of understanding the WHY of things. When a hurricane destroys what I have taken years to build and accumulate, what does it do to my relationship with those things? When the bottom falls out of the global economy and my retirement fund is depleted, where do I find a footing that will allow me to regain my balance and work out the new reality that lies ahead of me in the future? When my job is threatened and my family is uprooted, to whom do I turn for a renewed sense of security?

Jesus' bottom line for the Pharisees and Herodians might work for you and me: whatever you have, for however long you have it, is a sacred trust from God. Whatever we do with it as stewards matters in God's administrative policy. And it matters in terms of our own spiritual existence. I am not where I live, how much I possess, where I work, what I wear, which clubs or *Mardi Gras* krewe I belong to, which soccer team my child or I am on. All of those things are transitory. We get that, don't we? In fact, the only thing that can never be taken away from me is

who I am in the eyes of my Creator as declared to me in my Baptism. “Ron, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever.” And, in the first place, in the last place, and at each stage of the journey of my life, that is my overriding purpose and my ultimate reality. With every breath, whether I live in the lap of luxury or in a FEMA approved hotel room or a tent, it is my purpose in life and my joy to give myself to God.

We say it frequently, “All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee.” What this episode in the life of Jesus provides for us in the midst of what appears to be a reality of the weather, the economy, the politics of legislative funding, or a presidential election, is a new reality that puts everything in perspective. I can let go of the past, I can live today, and I can face the future because the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe has carved me into the palm of his hand, will never leave me nor forsake me, and is already out there in the future, calling me to life. Give to mortals what belongs to them. But give to God what belongs to God. And what belongs to God? Everything. I didn’t say believing that, really believing that, is easy. But if we surrender ourselves to that belief and open our lives to the grace of that God, it delivers us from evil, saves us in the time of trial, and liberates us to live our lives to God’s honor and glory, not our own.

Daniel B. Clendenin, has written, "As a friend of mine once observed, civilization is expensive, and taxes pay the tab. But absolute allegiance to an ultimate God, rendering our entire selves to Him without preconditions or limits, without hedging our bets, demands a higher order of magnitude. That takes a lifetime." (From: "Show Me The Money: Unconditional Allegiance to the Unconditioned God," The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself, Daniel B. Clendenin, Journey with Jesus Foundation)