Into this season of extreme electioneering,
contentious hearings on a supreme court nominee,
and challenges to our democratic process on so many levels,

Jesus emerges in today’s gospel
as a kind of public theologian:
not a politician but a religious leader who has plenty to say
about public ethics and morality,
about communal equity and justice,
about the leadership of his own faith community
and that of his homeland.

Jesus’ pattern of speaking and acting,
will eventually bring him face to face
with Caesar’s personal representative
that will end with Jesus’ public execution
as an enemy of the state
and a victim of religious intolerance.

Like every other action of a public figure
today’s brief narrative about Jesus needs to be put in context.
(Some of what follows is reliant upon the work of [*D. Mark Davis.)*](https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-structure-of-entrapment.html)

In the previous chapter of Matthew (ch. 21),
Jesus entered Jerusalem with great fanfare
greeted with cries of “hosanna” and rumors of kingship
that we recall each Palm Sunday.

This return visit to Jerusalem had been tumultuous,
including his overturning of the money changers tables
followed by a series of pointed parables
that we have heard over the past few weeks
not very subtly aimed at Temple leadership.

In response to this targeting
the leadership sets up a trap for Jesus.
The desperation of these leaders clearly in Jesus’ crosshairs
is underscored by the unusual tactic they contrive,
sending a cohort of political rivals,
Pharisees and Herodians,
to trick Jesus either into insulting civic leadership,
thus an act of sedition,
or into offending religious teaching,
which would be blasphemy.

While we do not know who Jesus’ debate coach was,
whoever it was – probably the Holy Spirit –
prepared him well,
and his evasive response deftly avoids this twin-jawed trap.

Living between the demands of civic government and religion,
between law and justice, is not easy.

A favorite illustration for walking this tightrope
[is reported of the former mayor of New York](https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/laguardian-angel/)
Fiorello LaGuardia, who led that city
during of Great Depression and World War II.

This 5’2” political giant once visited a night court
in one of the poorest wards
and sent the judge home and took over the bench.

Soon a poor elderly woman was brought before him,
charged with stealing a loaf of bread.
She told LaGuardia that her son-in-law had deserted them,
her daughter was sick, and grandchildren starving.

The shopkeeper, however, refused to drop the charges.
He demanded she be punished to teach others a lesson.

LaGuardia sighed and said to the woman “I’ve got to punish you.
The law makes no exceptions.
Ten dollars or ten days in jail.”

But as he pronounced the sentence,
he reached into his pocket and extracted a bill, saying,
“Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit;
and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom
fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread
so that her grandchildren can eat.
Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

New York newspapers reported
that $47.50 was soon turned over to the bewildered woman.
Fifty cents of that amount was contributed
by the grocery store owner himself,
while some seventy petty criminals,
people with traffic violations,
and New York City policemen,
each of whom had just paid fifty centers
for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

If only living what Vatican II calls our dual citizenship:
citizens both of this world and also members of God’s reign,
was that easily resolved …
(Gaudium et Spes, no. 43.)

Unfortunately, however, living in a hyper-politicized environment
in which truth and honesty are now serial victims,
and demeaning discourse and deceptive media tactics
crowd out the prudent and gracious,
such resolution seems difficult.

Quite frankly, given the appearance of this gospel
in the midst of such a heated election season,
it can be at least disappointing if not downright distressing
that Jesus himself doesn’t seem to give much direction.

Given his ingenious answer, one could surmise
that the politically astute Jesus
did a brilliant job of fence-riding in his interrogation.

But while this evasion tactic allows Jesus to steer clear
both of charges of sedition and blasphemy,
it can appear to leave his followers
with no perceptible moral compass
for navigating between citizenship in this world
and God’s holy reign.

But then again … maybe Jesus does teach us something profound
that may have eluded us at first hearing.

In 1982 two political activists – Ray Ransberger and Marshall Fritz –
created a debate strategy now known as the Ransberger pivot.
It is a strategy in which a speaker attempts to find common ground
with their “opponents.”

I doubt whether Jesus was well versed in this debate strategy,
but he does achieve an interesting pivot,
turning the whole issue of paying taxes on its head.

So we return to the scene of the debate:
Jesus is in the temple precincts.
He is publicly engaged by a group of Herodians and Pharisees
who flatter their way into the conversation with Jesus
by affirming that he is both honest and godly.

Then they spring the double-bladed trap
hoping to force Jesus into either aligning with Rome
or aligning with Jewish law.

Here’s where Jesus engineers an inspired pivot:
he asks them for a coin and they give him a piece of silver
bearing the image of a Roman emperor.

And this pivot springs a theological embarrassment on his foes,
for in possessing such a coin
they committed sacrilege on the temple precincts
since the Mosaic commandments
prohibit “graven images” in any form.

In reflecting on this gospel,
one helpful blogger does his own surprising pivot
that [revolves around the design of money](https://withallmysoul.com/2017/10/19/the-image-is-everything/).

This preacher first examines the images on money today.
Starting with the Euro which is designed around
European architectural periods:
the 5 Euro is classical Greece,
the 10 Euro is Romanesque,
and the 20 is Gothic.

He notes that when you have a 50 euro bill,
it is not just paper but a connection
to the heritage of the Renaissance.

The Canadian dollar, nicknamed the Loony,
depicts a Canadian loon,
underscoring their natural resources as a valued heritage.

He then surprised me by examining Confederate money
issued during the Civil War.
I have never looked at a Confederate bill before.
Shockingly, the $100 note depicts
relatively well-dressed slaves,
happily working in cotton fields.

The blogger finally turns his discerning gaze to our own money,
of the seven images bills currently in circulation.
Five are American presidents, two are founding fathers.
All are men, and all look very white,
despite Alexander Hamilton’s mixed heritage.

While it is true that in 2016 then-Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew
announced that in 2020 the $20 bill was to depict
the American abolitionist Harriet Tubman,
and the back of the $10 would feature leaders of
the suffrage movement like Sojourner Truth,
such has never come to pass.

His conclusion: the images on our money
do not look like our country.
They look like the traditionally privileged and the powerful.

In that vein, maybe when Jesus willingly handed over
that Roman coin with its Imperial image back to his rivals,
he was saying that Rome could keep its privilege … its pomp.
But God had a different coinage that Caesar could never usurp.
In the divine bureau of eternal engraving and printing,
God’s currency is stamped with 7.8 billion images and counting.
For God’s image is not engraved on silver or greenbacks,
but on the face of every human being
each minted in the image of God.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.
Give him and every legitimate form of leadership their legal due,
their constitutional policies and procedures.

But that does not authorize them
to turn people into merchandise,
to commodify people’s worth according to age or race,
sexual orientation or gender,
to calculate our value based on a stock portfolio,
real estate holdings, or bank balance.

And to give to God what is God’s
is not simply paying some personal God tax or sin penalty
that will wipe our personal ledgers clean
and leverage eternal life for us.

Giving to God what is God’s
also requires giving to God’s creatures
each created in that divine image
their due as well: dignity, respect, and yes, even love.
And as citizens of this world and the next,
it is also incumbent upon us to build a just society
in which civic leaders and governments do that as well.

And the rabbi asked his students how they could tell when the night had ended and the day was on its way. “Could it be,” asked one “when you can see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?” “No,” said the rabbi. “Is it,” asked another, “When you can look at a distant tree and tell whether it is an olive or a fig tree?” “No,” said the rabbi.” Is it,” asked a third, “when you can gaze into a cup and tell whether the liquid is water or wine?” “No,” said the rabbi.” “Then tell us,” they demanded, “Tell us when you know that the night has ended and the day is on its way.” “It is,” said the rabbi, “when you can look into the face of any woman or man and see that they are your sister or brother, because if you cannot do this then it is still night no matter what the time.”

As baptized we are called to be children of the light,
to let our light shine out against the darkness
that sometimes overshadows our land and our lives

Our luminosity grows when we traffic in Jesus currency,
when we recognize that God’s holy coinage is humanity itself
and that the face of every woman or man is, indeed,
a sacred treasure
valuable beyond any Caesar-calculus.

In this unsettling, even disturbing time,
we embrace anew God’s lavish richness
splashed across the faces of the human race
and as citizens of this world and the next
invest earnestly and enthusiastically
in the treasure we call humanity.
Through Christ our Lord.