

A visit to Christ & Holy Trinity must be prefaced by an enormous thank you from Peggy and me for the clear contribution you have made to the richness of your former associate and our daughter Maryetta's priesthood – I bring greetings and words of enormous affection from her. God has given her an abundance of gifts, but many of those gifts may have been left fallow without the love, patience, faithfulness and wonder of the nurturing nature of this parish, this part of God's vineyard. And so, we simply say thank you.

My thanks also to John for this invitation to be with you as (1) you begin a new programmatic year, (2) as we all struggle to make sense out of these disquieting times and, (3) as a parish, you must begin to wrestle anew with the issues related to Christian stewardship. I hope I can be of some small aid to each of you in the course of my visit.

While I now make my home on Cape Cod, my last parish was a wonderful place, Saint Michael and All Angels Church in Dallas, Texas. So, as one would be want to say in that part of the world, let us “*drill down*” into the meaning of this morning's appointed Gospel...hopefully capturing some of it's meaning for you and me and for this your parish family.

Let us start on this silly and yet timely note: what, generally, separates Republicans from Democrats in the Episcopal Church? The altar rail for those in the pews are most often Republicans and, those behind the altar, the clergy, are most often Democrats!

Now, as we seek to make sense out of the words “*render to Caesar,*” consider this hypothetical, “fanciful preacher imagined” event from the life of Our Lord. On one occasion two persons approached Our Lord on the road from Westport to Washington, one carrying a McCain bumper sticker, the other an Obama bumper sticker. They say to Jesus, “*Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God. Tell us then, who should we vote for, McCain or Obama?*” (Now, I bet you can image how John and I would answer that question along with most of the clergy we know!) But, believe me, Jesus is different. I can only guess, and in all seriousness, he would have said, “*Vote for those you believe will best establish the Father's kingdom of justice, mercy and peace.*”

The point? This morning's Gospel confronts us with the reality that Our Lord's answers are not always perfectly clear! Like the TV evangelist and, yes, even some misguided Episcopal clergy, His answers are not always black and white, unambiguous, easy solutions!

To begin to understand today's Gospel, “How do you know that you are loved?” Now this is critical. Because God loves us so deeply, so entirely, God has done what each of us is called to do if we truly love another: give to the beloved the freedom to seek, determine and act on what we come to understand as the mind of God. Our God demands that through deep prayer and hard discernment, each one of us do for ourselves the rigorous work of deciding exactly what is God's will in an ever more complex world of science, politics, economics, human relationships and all the rest. For this preacher, so much of the purpose and wonder of life is to be found in our struggle with our won consciences, ... in creating the critical, God driven, values we build and hold at the center of our hearts and in our willingness to act out our lives with a fearless God honoring, abandonment! Let me come hard at the point as it relates to each of us and the critical issue of Stewardship:

The question, the challenges for Christians in the midst of so much uncertainty and potential for fear is this: “*Will I so persevere in my giving that the Church (and other agencies critical to God's love story here on earth) will be able to persevere?*”

And as it relates to this superb parish:

“Will I be a part of and a meaningful contributor to a faith community that possesses (1) the stamina, (2) the hope, (3) the material means, (4) the courage to literally persevere over the forces of despair, greed, anger, hatred, skepticism, misunderstanding and fear which can be so evident in our personal lives and rampant in so much of the culture which surrounds us?”

Ask yourself, *“What do you want to remember about yourself at this critical point in time?”* *“What do you want to weave into the tapestry of your life’s history at this point in time?”*

At the end of that superb film *“Schindler’s List”* there is a heart wrenching scene in which Oscar Schindler who bought the freedom of so many Jews looks at his car and his golden stick pin and regrets that he did not give more of his money and possessions to save more lives. He had chosen to use his opportunities far better than most, but in the end he regretted that he could not go back and make even better choices.

Part of my heritage is that my father and grandfather were priests of this Church. (And, of course, Maryetta is the fourth in that rabbinical line, in my judgment, the best of the lot.)

There were many times I went to my father for counsel: he was bright, shrewd, well schooled in the ways of the world, sage in terms of the church and deeply religious. Thus, after offering specific counsel, he would always say, *“Now, Mark, take all of this to your secret place and weigh your response.”* You see, he assumed, that there was a place to which I would go to be alone with God, a place to address fears and uncertainties, to think and pray through the relationships, decisions, challenges things that are of critical import in my life at any given time.

I urge you this morning to go to that place and **be bold enough to bring directly before God the specifics of what you will do to support God’s cause in these challenging times and in this your spiritual home.** I urge you to go to that place for two reasons: one, God’s causes will not be well affected without your wise, bold and sacrificial participation. And two, in rejecting the fear and control things like money and these times can have, you will know that joy that comes when you *“render to God the things that are Gods.”*

Again, thank you for having me and may God bless you! Amen.