

Twice in my life, at work, I experienced betrayals in a very underhanded way. I was set up to look bad in front of somebody. Both times it was so painful that it took me 3 years to forgive. Has anybody ever set you up to look bad?

Jesus understands. He knows what it's like to get set up; it happened to him several times, like the incident in today's Gospel, where 2 different groups attempt to totally discredit him, to shut him down. They want to stop Jesus from preaching anymore about the kingdom of God in the way he says God, his Father, has revealed it to him. Jesus's message is a threat to their social position and their comfortable lives. They want Jesus off the stage because they don't want to change their lives. They reject God's will as revealed by Jesus.

So they set him up to look bad; they devise a "gotcha" question that they're sure will trap him, where he'll offend people no matter how he answers. They ask him at a large public gathering: should we pay the Roman tax or not? If Jesus says yes, he'll lose the support of the people who hate the Roman occupation of their country. If Jesus says don't pay the tax, that's treason, and he will be terminated with extreme prejudice.

To their total dismay, Jesus is able to *finesse* his answer to their question. He says "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." ... Brilliant! Jesus's answer even throws in a subtle jab at his opponents. He's implying: you're not doing this, you're not giving to God what belongs to God – and that's an undivided heart.

In finessing his answer, Jesus recognizes we live in two kingdoms, God's and this world's, and he's instructing us to act as he would in both. His answer is really about keeping God central in our lives, giving God our undivided hearts, being witnesses to the Gospel in both kingdoms by how we live. Prioritize God's kingdom, and then we'll have no problem giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Have an undivided heart.

Most of us Christians struggle with a divided heart. We straddle those two kingdoms: we plant one foot in the kingdom of self-interest and self-indulgence; our other foot is planted in God's kingdom, where we think of others first, where we find eternal life through compassion, sacrifice, discipline, generosity and forgiveness. But those sins of selfishness are so attractive, so enticing, so alluring, that we keep trying to have it both ways, we try to rationalize and compromise between doing God's will, and what we want for ourselves.

There's no part of our lives or the world where the values of God's Kingdom don't apply. There's no part of our lives in which God isn't interested, or where his will shouldn't prevail. Christians are called to witness the Gospel in every aspect of our lives, to bring Christ to our world by our words, our choices and our actions.

When we were baptized, we became containers of God's presence in the kingdom of Caesar. No matter what our losses, disappointments or sins, God's Holy Spirit is at home in us: a loving, faithful *amigo* who wants to be with us, who accepts us and forgives us. God puts us in Caesar's kingdom to sanctify it, in spite of our sins, by becoming more like Christ in how we live.

What belongs to God, what we repay to God, are our undivided hearts, united with his by obedience to his ways. We pray for Jesus to heal whatever in our hearts divides us from God and one another, and to grace us with his help, so that when we're wrestling between our will and God's, we'll choose God's will ahead of our own. We can't let Caesar shape our faith, or we become like those Halloween costumes we'll see soon, pretending to be someone else.