

Sunday Morning Worship

Readings and Prayers 22nd October 2023



Isaiah 45.1-7

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
and the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you
and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.

I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the Lord do all these things.

This is the word of the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 1.1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus
Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

This is the word of the Lord.

Matthew 22.15-22

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to 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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection (by Ann Waizeneker)

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

In our Gospel reading this morning the Pharisees and the supporters of Herod band together to ask Jesus a question which they calculate he can't answer without getting himself into all sorts of trouble.

If Jesus advocates refusal to pay, he will immediately be denounced as a rebel. But if he says the tax must be paid, then he will be seen as a collaborator. So which is it to be? A dangerous rebel or a pathetic disappointment?

I would describe that as a no win situation!

Jesus' actual answer offers profound wisdom that presents us with a number of challenges. In effect, it is a reminder that each of us is both a citizen of the country we live in, and a citizen of heaven.

To the country we live in, which provides us with many services and to which we owe our safety, we have many obligations. But as citizens of heaven, we have deeper obligations of morality and principle that are ultimately more real, more meaningful, than the everyday cut and thrust of daily existence. In general, it may be that these two citizenships do not clash. But when they do, we know which allegiance is the greater. The question that Jesus leaves unanswered is: where does the boundary between the two actually lie?

That, I think, should be really thought provoking for us. And it puts me in mind of the criticism that is often voiced of church leaders today. Why don't they speak out more clearly on moral issues? I can't help thinking sometimes that some people who say that might have been just as critical of Jesus' reply in today's gospel. I can just imagine some of us criticising Jesus for lack of conviction – 'he ought to make a stand against unfair taxes', or 'it's a cop out to imply that God's realm is separate from everyday life' – that sort of thing.

And looking at it the other way, try to imagine how Jesus would answer some of our contemporary questions / challenges. For example, on

issues we face around environmental concerns. Rather than make a simple pronouncement, perhaps he would be more likely to point out the complexity, the flaws in our arguments.

So, what should we expect of church leadership? And how is each of us called to respond to the complexities of dual citizenship in the light of Jesus' answer about paying taxes?

The writer John Pridmore imagines an exchange between a bishop and a butcher who meet in a bus queue. They fall into a discussion about the morality of gambling. The bishop says that it is bad. The butcher argues that there is nothing wrong with a little flutter. Now, if the bishop says we should put our faith in God and not in horses, then his new friend, who is not a Christian, will, very probably, pooh-pooh his opinions. But if the bishop argues that gambling can become addictive and can lead to family breakdown, then the butcher may listen to him. By the same token, if the bishop is a truly humble man, he should pay heed / acknowledge the logic, when the butcher reminds him that it is only thanks to the National Lottery that the great west window of the bishop's cathedral survives.

What that brings home to me is that we don't live in a bubble. We have this dual citizenship and corresponding responsibilities – in God's kingdom and in our country. And we must engage with both.

The important thing with all of Jesus' words is to understand them in context and not to push the point too far: Jesus is **not** saying that the realm of the state is completely separate from the realm of the church. Clearly they overlap, and we are challenged to integrate them in our lives. And when they are in conflict, to think carefully about what our response should be - always remembering that, although we have an obligation to our country, we have a greater obligation to God.

In other words, Jesus poses the challenge, equally valid today, of encouraging us to seek God in, and through, all our relationships: within families, communities and society as a whole.

We have a great example of how uncomfortable and unwelcome this can be in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah this morning. Here, the big shock to the Jewish people is that King Cyrus is named as God's anointed / shepherd. Incredible really and not welcome – Cyrus was not Jewish, he worshipped idols, he represented the occupying power. And yet it is this pagan king of Persia who allowed the exiles to return, Jerusalem to be rebuilt and the foundation stone of the Temple to be re-laid.

God worked through Cyrus and it is surely for us to remember this and be open to connecting with our own communities, secular agencies, individuals with unconventional lives. With people we may not want to have anything to do with. We may not be comfortable in doing so but God might just be using them as he did Cyrus.

Life isn't black and white – we cannot divide it easily into the sacred and secular, but the message for us here is that we need constantly to be looking for where the secular finds its proper place within the sacred.

Prayers

Let us focus our gaze on the great God of our making,
As we pour out to him our prayers.

To the bidding: You, O Lord
Please respond: are the ground of our being.

You, O Lord:
are the ground of our being.

Lord of all, give your Church such maturity and wisdom
that we may not be swayed from our purpose and calling
by trivialities or worldly pressures,
but know increasingly our dependence
on you in all things and proclaim your Gospel
with steadfastness and joy.

Silence

You, O Lord:

are the ground of our being.

Lord of all, give to all monarchs,
leaders and heads of state graciousness and integrity,
that all in power and authority
may undertake their duties in a spirit of humility;
that the oppressed may find a voice,
and the nations work together for the good of the world.
We lift before you the situation between Palestine and Israel and we
pray especially for the people of Gaza;
in the multitude of your mercies look with compassion
upon all who cry out to you for help.

Silence

You, O Lord:

are the ground of our being.

Lord of all, give to our homes
and places of work and leisure your harmony and peace;
give us grace to respect one another and ourselves
in the way we talk and think, and in the way we behave.

Silence

You, O Lord:

are the ground of our being.

Lord of all, speak your peace into the hearts
of all who are agitated, anxious or confused.
Lay your hands of healing on all who are sick, or in need
and let them know your reassurance and love.
From our own community we pray especially for
Alan Coe, Sam and Andy Fellows, Jack Tubby, Stacey Pearce,
Michael Orton, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Jo Bunn, Jason Thomson,
Ryan Day, Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, David New,

and Adrina and Alan Price.

Silence

You, O Lord:

are the ground of our being.

Lord of all, welcome into your kingdom

all who have kept faith

and now can lay their burdens down before you.

We pray for the recently departed Richard Edmonds

and all who mourn.

And we remember with love and gratitude those whose anniversary of death falls at this time:

Yvonne Mousley, Margaret Lawrence, Ray Hughes, Kathleen Bailey,
Harold Warren.

May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Silence

You, O Lord:

are the ground of our being.

Lord of all, the order and complexity of creation

sings your praise,

and we give voice to it now

as we offer you our song of lives rededicated

to the work of your kingdom.

Merciful Father,

accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son,

our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.