

Matt 22:15-22 - Render to Ceasar

Rev. Susan Pickering

Gathering of the People of God

Organ Prelude

Welcome & Notices

Centring Prayer

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for worship,
let us rest in the silence, breathing in the presence of God...

Processional Hymn: **TiS 132 Holy holy holy**

Light the Christ Candle

We light this candle as a reminder that Christ is the light of the world.

Call to Worship

We meet in the name of God

***Creator of the universe,
Source of true humanity***

We meet in the name of Jesus,

***Word made flesh,
Bringer of peace and justice.***

We meet in the name of the Holy Spirit,

***Midwife of new humanity,
Inspirer of us all***

Gathered together

Let us Worship God

Acknowledgment of Country

We recognise that God created heaven and earth, the sea and the sky, and all that is in them.

This land is Holy Ground

As we gather we acknowledge the traditional custodians,
the Turrbal and Jagera people, elders, past, present and emerging

We honour them for their custodianship of the land,

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on which we gather today.

Introit **'The Call' from "Five Mystical Songs" by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Words from The Temple (1633), by George Herbert**

Prayer of Thanksgiving & Confession

Eternal Mystery
God of heaven and earth,
you spoke into the void and created all that is.
You created each of us uniquely
and invited us to travel with you.
Christ calls us to give to you what is yours,
Calling us to be the people of God.

Why then, are we so afraid to listen and respond?
Why do we fail to hear the words, "be not afraid?"

We cling to outworn security,
Afraid to let go of what is safe and familiar.

We fail to love others,
Afraid of being vulnerable and open to hurt.

We fail to share your peace
Afraid of rejection and conflict

We fail to witness your presence in our lives
Afraid to live the gospel

We fail to speak out against injustice,
Afraid of being the only voice

Eternal Mystery,
God of heaven and earth,
forgive us,
Send your Spirit of restoration upon us,
May she call us to find courage and strength
To enable us to give to you what is yours,
To offer our lives in service as witnesses of the Kingdom.
In Christ we pray, Amen

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Words of Assurance

Come and see the grace of God for us.

We are loved as we are, not as we believe we should be.

We are given forgiveness as a gift,

Beyond anything we have deserved or earned.

Let us lift up our hearts and receive our freedom.

Thanks be to God.

Doxology: Bless the Lord my Soul (TiS 706)

Service of the Word

Readings

1st reading **1 Thes 1:1-10**

2nd reading **Matt 22:15-22**

This is the Living Word

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Anthem **Jesu, joy of man's desiring by J.S. Bach**

Text by Jahn (c1620-c1682) trans. Robert Bridges (1844-1930)

Message

In 1789 Benjamin Franklin said; 'In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.' Taxes have been a controversial and hot topic of discussion, it seems, forever. I want to begin by providing some information and context on the passage, always helpful I find.

Our reading this morning is set in 1st century Palestine, it was occupied and under the rule of the Roman Empire, 'a religious and political ordinance in the world.'¹ This was a time when political and religious situations were inseparable,² Jesus would've known 'no distinction between politics, religion and the worship of God,'³

¹ Moltmann

² Moltmann

³ Hauerwas

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indeed the act of worship itself was understood as political in nature by authorities.⁴

The Roman occupation generated mistrust and resentment among the Jewish people and paying taxes was a controversial issue⁵ and so the question asked of Jesus is far from abstract. While taxes were customary they were not Mosaic law, not part of the Torah. The tax in Matthew 22 was understood to be based on moveable property.⁶ In reality only the wealthy had property, but the tax was still imposed on the poor, and so it became a tax on the person, as the land was seen to belong to the Roman Empire so now did the bodies of the poor.⁷

The Pharisees, the instigators, were understood to generally resent Roman rule, yet they accepted it as a necessary evil,⁸ their disciples would have generally followed their lead. The Herodians, well not too much is known about them, one suggestion I came across was that their 'name suggests a secular political party that supported the right of Herod the Great's successors,'⁹ so in short we have a bunch of Herod's groupies, pro-Roman and no issues with paying their taxes.

The trap, following a bit of flattery it's delivered; 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' The question is profoundly political yet its phrasing, religious, another way of asking would be 'does this fit with Torah?'¹⁰ Jesus is put in an impossible position, there was no simple yes or no answer. A simple no would've provided the religious leaders all they needed to fuel their plot to destroy him, he would be wide open to the accusation of 'anti-Roman activity.'¹¹ A simple yes, would leave the revolutionary zealots reeling and Jesus wide open to accusations of advocating Roman collaboration.¹²

Jesus is still in the temple, the most holy space in the holy city. He's not stupid, the text says Jesus is 'aware of their malice' (the Greek being πονηριαν (ponerian) which translates to hurtful or evil in influence) and so their strategy is beginning to backfire as Jesus calls them out on their hypocrisy, he asks them to produce the

⁴ Wallis

⁵ Wallis in preaching the Word on sojo.net

⁶ Herzog

⁷ Herzog

⁸ Hare

⁹ Hare

¹⁰ Hare

¹¹ Hare

¹² Wallis

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coin that's used for tax, his opponents obliging and presenting a silver Roman denarius. As they present the coin Jesus asks; 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' The coin bore the emperor's image (his head), and the inscription "*Tiberius Caesar, Divi Augusti Filius Augustus*" roughly translated this declares the emperor to be the "divine son" or "son of a god" and declares Tiberius as "high priest." 'Give (or more accurately would be give back) 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.

Moving on was probably the wisest decision, Jesus has outed them. Jewish Law prohibited graven images - they would've been well aware of the second commandment,¹³ this coin is nothing short of blasphemous, resented and rejected by many. He exposed them for their uncritical loyalties, their belief that faithfulness to God can 'coexist peacefully with faithfulness to the empire and allegiance to mammon.'¹⁴ By placing in parallel God and emperor Jesus is asking, who or what bears God's image and to whom do you belong?¹⁵

If Jesus were to ask us to produce the coin, what he'd probably get is a bank card bearing the image of a financial institution, and so in the context of the reading the question would remain to whom and what do we belong? As I wrote this I was challenged to the core, but let's face it Jesus never shied away from conflict or controversy he wasn't afraid to speak the truth, because he is the truth and confident in his identity.

When we switch on the news we see protests in Belarus because of their recent elections, the US is heading to the polls soon, in fact the hymn we will sing after the message is by Carolyn Gillette Winfrey and when liaising with her for permission to use the hymn she asked for our prayers. Elections are happening around the world and in just under 2 weeks we too will vote in the election. Don't panic, I'm not going to suggest who you vote for or even ask you, but I do ask that you spend time reflecting on this text.

Patriotism, and I'm talking in its negative form, is growing around the world, politicians in the US wear the American Flag and we now see that our politicians too are wearing the Australian flag on their clothing - to whom do they belong? We are forced by this passage to consider our allegiances. I'm a proud holder of Australian citizenship and a passport - that said I, we, don't belong to Australia. We don't belong to the Uniting Church, we don't belong to Saint Andrew's, I know

¹³ Exodus 20:4-5

¹⁴ Errickson in Feasting on the Gospels

¹⁵ Dykstra in Preaching the Word on sojo.net

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confronting. We belong to God, in the Sermon the Mount Jesus says; “No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and wealth.”¹⁶ We belong to God and the Uniting Church is the institution to which we are drawn and very specifically Saint Andrew’s - it is in this place we have the opportunity to gather as the body of Christ, the people of God to listen for the Word, celebrate the sacraments and offer worship to God.

In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jnr wrote from Birmingham Jail following criticism of his non-violent direct action. It addresses issues of justice, just laws and unjust laws, he specifically addresses some of the negative encounters with the white church leaders, he confesses; ‘I been disappointed with the church,’¹⁷ but as one ‘who loves the church.’¹⁸ He speaks of some leaders who ‘have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.’¹⁹ He recalls ‘I have wept over the laxity of the church’ ‘there was a time when the church was very powerful...early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed... [When] the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.’²⁰ It’s a powerful letter from prison, prison being the place in which Paul wrote many a letter, proclaiming what he understands it is to belong to God.

Who’s are we and to whom do we belong? We are people of God, called to be the hands, feet, heart and voice of Christ in the world. There is a very fine line between respecting authority and offering allegiance.²¹ Offering allegiance to God, to whom we belong, means that sometimes we need to participate in resistance and speaking out. Jesus showed no deference towards religious and political authorities, in fact he generally antagonised them with his responses,²² In Jesus’ life and ministry, he not only confronted, he taught a new way of living that undermined the entire system, he wasn’t crucified because he was a nice man who conformed, he was a threat, confronting to the core and still does.

To become the church on the edge will require us to be courageous and fearless, prayerfully discerning and we could end up in places we’d perhaps rather not be,

¹⁶ Matthew 6:24

¹⁷ https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

¹⁸ https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

¹⁹ https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

²⁰ https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

²¹ Roth in Preaching the Word on sojo.net

²² Wallis in Preaching the Word on sojo.net

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speaking the truth in accordance with the values of kingdom that is founded in love. If we don't pay tax it's not good, but because we do we have a voice, one that can speak into the realm of our leaders to ensure that they are used appropriately. Today marks the end of anti poverty week yet "the rate of poverty in Queensland is 1.7 per cent higher than the national average".²³ Refugees are still been held in detention after 7 long and gruelling years, people experiencing family and domestic violence remain in the home because there is nowhere to go, people continue to make their beds on the streets - we have a voice and the citizenship we need to seek is that of the kingdom of God, we are a people called to rise up and speak out to proclaim the values of the kingdom.

Prayer

God in whose image we are created, let us hold on to your love, let us never forget that we belong to you, as does the earth, the whole of creation, justice, righteousness and love. Send your Spirit to strengthen us, to enable us to step out courageously and call for transformation in our world. Amen

Hymn: Is It Lawful to Pay Taxes? BEACH SPRING 8.7.8.7 D

"Is it lawful to pay taxes when they prop up Caesar's rule?"
So some people asked of Jesus, wanting him to seem a fool.
Saying "no" would be sedition; saying "yes" would be a sin.
Jesus changed the conversation, calling them to look within.

"Find a tax coin in your treasure; see the image that it bears.
Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. (Give to rulers what is theirs.)"
Yet he pressed on with his message; "Give to God what is God's own."
We who bear our Maker's image worship God and God alone.

Lord of all, in every nation, may your word be understood —
That we have an obligation to support the common good.
May our taxes, all together, fund our working hand in hand
So that life will be made better for all people in this land.

Still, we also hear your teaching: "Give to God what God is due."
May no ruler — overreaching — try to take the place of you.
May we listen to your message, may we honor what is yours;
May we, living in your image, seek your kingdom that endures.

Prayers for the People:

²³ <https://www.qcross.org.au/more-queenslanders-are-living-in-poverty-new-report-finds/>

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As a sign of sacred unity, we join together in the prayer;

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,

on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

Peace

Sending Forth the People of God

Hymn: TiS671 Made in God's Likeness

Made in God's likeness, Moved by the Spirit,
Called to create a new world for the Lord,
Called to create a new world for the Lord.

Birds in the mountains sing of your praises,
Called in the morning to tell of your love;
Bellbirds and shipboards sing of cartoon,
Celebrate always that Christ is the king.

Made in God's likeness, Moved by the Spirit,
Called to create a new world for the Lord,
Called to create a new world for the Lord.

Summoned at noontide, come now and follow,
Joyfully marching wherever you lead;
Roller birds stuntmen, kingfishers' laughter,
Clowns of creation in the circus of God.

Made in God's likeness, Moved by the Spirit,
Called to create a new world for the Lord,
Called to create a new world for the Lord.

Called in the nighttime to act in your drama,
Take on the Christ role, your script in our hearts;
Masked owl and bower bird teach us to study the
Part we must play and the gifts we can share.
Made in God's likeness, Moved by the Spirit,

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Called to create a new world for the Lord,
Called to create a new world for the Lord.

Called now at all times to with on the Father,
Follow his lead as he partners our dance;
Brolga bird dances, retreats and returning,
Bowling at last to his partner, the Lords.

Made in God's likeness, Moved by the Spirit,
Called to create a new world for the Lord,
Called to create a new world for the Lord.

Words of Mission & Blessing

Let us go out into the world,
giving to God that which is God's.
We are called to witness the radical kingdom of God,
To follow Christ,
Let us do so fearlessly,
Turning from idols of the world to serve the living God.

May the blessing of God, rest upon the path upon which we walk.
May the blessing of Christ, fill us with courage to claim our identity as people of the
Way.
And may the blessing of the Holy Spirit, Sophia, inspire us with her wisdom that we
may speak truth into the world.

Recession Shalom to You

**Shalom to you now, Shalom my friends.
May God's full mercies bless you,
my friends.
In all your living and through your loving,
Christ be your shalom,
Christ be your shalom.**

Postlude

Sources

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