



The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 22nd October 2023

Call to Worship (Ps 29)

Give glory to God, you powers of heaven!
Give Glory! Honour God's might!
Honour the glorious name of God;
worship in splendour and holiness.
Enthroned above the flood waters,
God reigns over all and for ever.
Give strength to your people, Almighty God,
and give them the blessing of your peace.

Creator Spirit, wellspring of our lives, as the refreshing rain falls on the just and unjust alike
refresh us with your mercy, who knows our own injustice
As the stream flows steadily on, defying all the odds of stone and water
flow over every boundary and border that separates us from each other.
As the waters of our baptism washed us and welcomed us
renew us now in newness of life and unity of love

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, today we join again in worship to give thanks for all that we enjoy and to seek forgiveness for all that is wrong, to search for understanding and to find strength of faith.

We are glad to be part of this Christian community that supports and nurtures us as we struggle day by day with the challenge of faith and the realities of the world, and we give thanks for the love that upholds us, the care that reassures us and the mission that challenges us.

We are glad to be part of the worldwide family of Christian people that binds us together with people of all nations and cultures, teaching us of the breadth and depth of God's love and showing us different ways of responding to the call of Christ to engage in the mission of the Kingdom.

Yet glad though we are to be a part of the church, our gladness is mixed with unease, with disappointment, with guilt, even with fear as we look around us and see that the world seems as uncertain and dangerous place as it ever was. Despite our message of peace and justice, despite the gospel of indiscriminate love, and despite the similar teachings of other faiths about love and respect, we seem to live in the midst of increasing hatred, violence and war. Daily we hear of death and destruction, of stubborn refusal to consider the other's point of view, of personal and national selfishness that will allow nothing to stand in its way.

The world is in need of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation, and we pray that these qualities of the kingdom might come; that humanity might be seen as more important than nationality or religion, and that the One God of Christianity, Judaism and Islam might be worshipped and served in peace and mutual respect.

We cannot repent on behalf of others, but we can seek ways of contributing to the peace of the world. We can hold in our thoughts and our prayers the misery of war and the anguish of loss. Through us and through people of all faiths and people of goodwill of no faith, may God's kingdom come and God's will be done.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: Genesis 1:26-30

HYMN 726 (Psalm 121):

I to the hills will lift mine eyes:
from whence doth come mine aid?
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.

Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will
he slumber that thee keeps.
Behold, he that keeps Israel,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps; the Lord thy shade
on thy right hand doth stay;
the moon by night thee shall not smite
nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall
preserve thee from all ill;
henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.

Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

Reflection:

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at Matthew's stories about Jesus in Jerusalem, and have studied some of his parables and his debates with the leaders of the Temple - and here we are again.

The question of the Pharisees and the Herodians, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" was a trap for Jesus that he didn't fall into. But it has trapped others, even to the present day. It has been used as a statement of Christian political obligation—a quick and easy answer to any questions or qualms about our relationship with government. Jesus' statement about rendering to Caesar, of giving to the Emperor, has been used as a general rule that can answer any number of specific questions. But it's not that at all. It's a clever answer to one very specific question. But it also raises all sorts of general questions about God and Caesar—and only hints at a way to answer them.

Two important political groups in Jerusalem—the Pharisees and the Herodians—are ganging up on Jesus. It's a strange partnership; the two groups didn't like each other at all. First are the Herodians; they were supporters of Herod, the puppet King of Israel who was nothing more than a Roman lackey. Herodians would have a great investment in obeying Roman laws and paying Roman taxes. Then we have the Pharisees, who, as religious purists, would object strongly to paying taxes to any pagan king and especially to a king who, like Caesar, claimed to be of divine lineage.

At the same time, the crowds, who were watching the debate, also had a stake in this. They didn't like either the Romans or their taxes, and they frequently showed their dislike by rioting. They would be very unhappy at any answer that seemed to approve of the taxes.

Next, there are the soldiers, who were watching the crowds. They were Romans who were paid by the taxes in question. They didn't much like the crowds, whose rioting they had to control. Finally, it was Passover time—the most likely time of the year for a good riot about religion, the emperor, Rome in general, and Roman taxes in particular.

In other words, this was not an abstract debate about politics in general or the relationship between Church and state. It was a perfect set-up, a very clever trap. The intent of the question was to ensure that Jesus was either arrested for treason by the Romans, discredited as a false teacher by the Pharisees, condemned by the Herodians, or lynched by the crowd as a traitor to his own people.

On one level, Jesus slipped out of the trap on a technicality. He asked for a coin (notice that Jesus doesn't have one, but the Pharisees do). It's a special minting of the denarius. On the coin is marked, "Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of divine Augustus, High Priest". Below these words, the image of the emperor is pressed into the metal. To any good Jew, *the coin itself* violated the first commandment by claiming that Caesar was divine, and it violated the second commandment by containing an image of this false god.

A big part of what Jesus said was simply "give this false god back." It could belong to no one but Caesar; it could certainly not belong to anyone who worshiped the God of Israel.

This answer was a clever response by Jesus. It avoided the trap, and it allowed *that* particular tax to be paid with *that* particular coin—not as an act of political submission, but as a sign of religious faith. It was a very specific, and very narrow answer that made it possible for Jesus both to escape the trap and to preach a bit.

But this answer, good as it is, doesn't directly address the broader questions. Clearly, *that* coin belonged to Caesar—but what else does? No doubt some things belong to God, but what are those things, and how does one decide? Until we begin to get clear on these questions, what Jesus had to say about that one Roman coin is not much help for us as we make decisions about possible conflicts of loyalty, obligation, or actions involving the claims of the government and the claims of God.

Although Jesus is neither giving a theory about the relationship of religious people to their government nor making a simple division of life into two neat and distinct parts—this is Caesar's, this is God's—he is, on a much deeper level, doing something much more subtle and profound.

Remember, that coin belonged to Caesar because it was stamped with Caesar's image (the Greek word here for "image" is *eikōn*) and marked with Caesar's inscription. The coin was

made by the emperor for the emperor's purposes. All that is a pretty good claim to ownership—a claim that Jesus recognized, at least for that coin. 'Give Caesar what is Caesar's, and give God what is God's'

So we naturally ask, "What, then, belongs to God?" Well, what is made in the image of God? What is stamped in the likeness of God and created for God's purposes? Do you see where he's going here?

Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, says God in the creation story of the Hebrew scriptures. Our image and likeness, and what is written upon us, is that of God. To whom, then, do we belong? To whom are we to render, to surrender, ourselves?

Jesus is saying simply that what belongs to God is nothing other than we ourselves. Our lives are God's, and all that we do is to be marked by that conviction. All competing claims for our lives and for our allegiance are to be evaluated and understood in the light of whose we are, and whose image we bear.

Sadly, none of this provides us with any easy answers when we face problems with a particular moral or political question. It does not automatically tell us who to vote for, or what policy to support, or which course of action is best regarding global warming, immigration, energy, taxes, the economy, or current and future wars. Problems like these will continue to be difficult and ambiguous, and that difficulty and that ambiguity will not change if just read a few verses from Matthew's gospel. Still, what Jesus said to the Pharisees and the Herodians can provide us a very good place to start.

Give to God what is God's—for God owns that which is made in God's image. It is that image, in ourselves and in others, that leads a passion for justice, compassion, and righteousness.

It is that image that both claims our allegiance and inspires our efforts. It is God's image that gives ultimate value and meaning to what we do. It is that image which gives us the assurance that something lasting, something permanently worthwhile, is being formed in the plot of our own personal stories, and at the heart of this broken and yet redeemed world. That, at least, is where we begin.

Certainly, give to Caesar the things that are Caesars—but give to God the things that are God's.

HYMN 201:

O sing a song of Bethlehem, of shepherds watching there,
and of the news that came to them from angels in the air:
the light that shone on Bethlehem fills all the world today;
of Jesus' birth and peace on earth the angels sing alway.

O sing a song of Galilee, of lake and woods and hill,
of him who walked upon the sea, and bade its waves be still:
for though, like waves on Galilee, dark seas of trouble roll,
when faith has heard the Master's word, peace falls upon the soul.

O sing a song of Calvary, its glory and dismay;
of him who hung upon the tree, and took our sins away:
for he who died on Calvary is risen from the grave,

and Christ our Lord, by heaven adored, is mighty now to save.

Prayer: We give thanks for the word of God in Scripture for the stories of faith and justice it relates, and for the great names that appear in God's story:

Abraham, called to venture into the unknown, trusting in God's promise;

Moses, called to lead his people from slavery to the Promised Land, against all odds;

Joshua, called to trust in God; Samuel, called to a life of service, even before he realised the call was from God; the prophets called to proclaim God's word of judgement regardless of the cost to themselves; John the Baptist, called to be a messenger in the wilderness, preparing the way of Christ; the twelve disciples, called to leave the security of their livelihoods to follow Jesus; the apostle Paul called to preach the gospel to all nations.

Help us to learn from the adventures of those heroes of faith, though sometimes their stories are full of cruelty and death, and are often obscure and difficult for us. Help us to separate the truth from the spin, the faith from the fantasy, and when the Bible seems to us contradictory and even offensive, lead us to a right interpretation, even if the truth of it is not always what we want to hear.

Loving God, we pray for those wrestling with difficult and demanding questions - those facing complex matters of conscience, those struggling with confusing moral decisions, those wrestling with confusing social issues, those coping with challenging theological concerns. Grant to all in such situations your wisdom, and help them to find the right way forward.

We pray for those who are faced with awkward yet important choices, between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood, love and hate; between the way of the world and the way of Christ, the way of self and the way of service. Give to all faced with such choices the courage to take the way of God.

We pray for the church. Save it from naïve fundamentalism, from judgemental attitudes, from dogmatically believing it has answers to every situation. Give to your people everywhere the humility to recognise that asking questions is part of faith.

Loving God, we pray for ourselves as day by day we are confronted with the need to choose. Sometimes the choice is clear, sometimes confusing, sometimes easy, sometimes difficult, sometimes mattering little, sometimes much. But help us, whatever the case, to gladly accept the responsibility of choosing, recognising that it is a privilege of being human.

Help us to decide wisely, seeking the will of God and responding to the guidance of the spirit. Help us to admit our error when we choose wrongly and be ready to change our decisions when necessary. And help us to remember when we go astray that the gospel is good news of forgiveness and renewal.

I invite you now to spend a few moments in your own prayer, in words or in silence, or simply in reflecting on the stories we have heard and the words we have read in our worship today.

Hear our prayer, Loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

HYMN 625:

God of freedom, God of justice,
God whose love is strong as death,
God who saw the dark of prison,
God who knew the price of faith:
touch our world of sad oppression
with your Spirit's healing breath.

Rid the earth of torture's terror,
God whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
God who shed the tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity,
restless for the common good.

Make in us a captive conscience
quick to hear, to act, to plead;
make us truly sisters, brothers,
of whatever race or creed:
teach us to be fully human,
open to each other's need.

Benediction

Let us go out into the noise and activity of the world.
Let us listen for the questions and the voices that we would rather not hear.
Let us respond to them with the energy of the Holy Spirit,
the power of the One who gives us life, and the boundless love of Christ.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.

Amen