



Gloucestershire Circuit Worship At Home for Sunday 18 October 2020

Prepared by the Revd Naomi Cooke

Call to Worship

God be with you. Let us sing to God a new song! Let earth and everyone in it – sing!
For God is great and worth a thousand Halleluiahs!
A powerful beauty sets God apart. Halleluiah!

Hymn StF 161 Speak O Lord as we come to you Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words

1 Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
to receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us ;
shape and fashion us in your likeness,
that the light of Christ might be seen today
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
all your purposes, for your glory.

2 Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
in the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail ;
let their truth prevail over unbelief.

3 Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds ;
help us grasp the heights of your plans for
us.

Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
that will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,
and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built
and the earth is filled with your glory.

Prayer of Adoration

Holy and life-giving God, you set into motion the wheel of sun and stars, of infinite universes; you organised the evolution of life on this planet; you gave us senses to brush against your creation, and minds to discover, learn, invent and wonder. Yours is the power and yours the love which surrounds us and supports us through all our experiences, our travels and the changes in our lives. As each day dawns, may we be reminded of the wonder and joy of knowing you, and as each day ends, may we turn to you again with thankfulness and praise. **Amen**

Prayer of Confession...

Friends, let us keep silence together as we search our hearts and acknowledge that it is our human nature to turn away from God's unfailing love – yet always remembering that it is because of this love that we can approach God without fear. Silence

And together we join in our prayer of confession:

**God of Truth and Light, we come before you,
conscious of all that holds us back
from the life and love that you would have us live.
When you came to us, we did not know you.
When you spoke to us, we did not hear you.
When you touched us, we turned away from you.
We have sinned against you in thought and word and deed.
We have denied your glory.**

Holy God, we are truly sorry and repent of all our sin, trusting in your mercy alone.

Silence

Declaration of Forgiveness

People of faith, God's forgiveness is eternal.
Embrace this forgiveness with joy and thanksgiving, and walk freely toward the light.
Thanks be to God.

Today's Gospel Reading: Matthew 22: 1-14

Hear the Gospel of Christ **Glory to Christ our Saviour.**

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

I hope by now you may have seen and heard about *Reset the Debt*¹. Four denominations including our own are calling on the Government to create a new 'Jubilee Fund' to provide grants to pay off and cancel unavoidable debt accrued by the poorest households during the lockdown period, giving them a more stable platform from which to face the difficult winter ahead. Of course, were our Government to heed this call, the cost would need to be met, most likely through the taxes we all pay, (and which some Global companies *should* be made to pay), and indeed, we might be asked to pay more. And some of us would willingly give more and some of us would oppose such a move.

Tax: who pays how much, who gets a cut, who gets a rise? This is, and perhaps always will be a hot potato. Money, *my* money, *my* earnings, how easily it becomes the golden calf, an idol made by human hands to which we bend our knee.

Historically there has always been a sense of discomfort for folk around the idea of mixing the realms of politics and religion. Politics: of the people, public life, money, power relations. Religion: the belief in and worship of God. And the discomfort somehow lies in the fact that what I believe about policy and praxis, justice, equality and fairness, may not be what you believe about those things. And we Christians run a mile from disagreement ...so then KAPOW! ... a holy war breaks out! (Oh, and God is on my side!)

But how can we possibly imagine that politics and religion could exist apart? Watching the news this week: stories concerning people deemed no longer 'viable' and told to simply 'retrain', or noting that another contract² has been handed out without tender to a company linked to Government ministers and advisors...watching, I simply cannot prize apart what Jesus teaches me about Gospel values from the political decisions and policy of the day. If we believe in a God who became one of us through the incarnation, how can we come to any conclusion other than that our common life is religious!

So tell us teacher – what do you think?

Jesus and the devout Jews he addresses in this Gospel story did not have the luxury of imagining that politics and religion were separate. The situation within which they lived out their faith, was under a brutal, oppressive Roman occupation. They were buried under mountains of unpayable debt, suffering as they lost their land, their income, their livelihoods. Their fervent prayer was for a Messiah to come and save them.

Now, the Herodians collaborated with Rome by supporting the rule of the puppet king Herod, hence their name. The Pharisees, tended to accept Roman rule as a necessary evil and advised submission, providing the Romans didn't interfere with their practice of

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/news/latest-news/all-news/reset-the-debt-churches-call-for-action-to-help-people-forced-into-debt-by-covid-19/>

² <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/seven-week-old-firm-with-links-to-tory-peer-lands-122-million-ppe-contract/08/10/>

religion. Many others, including the Zealots simply wanted Rome out...they fought against their oppressors, plotting revolution. Rome's response to it all was to demand submission through enforced taxes and brutal punishments, including, crucifixion on a cross. So paying your taxes was a matter of life or death! And the special coin used to pay tax displayed the image of Caesar, who believed himself divine. For Jews, simply handling this money was offensive and idolatrous.

The Temple exists right in the middle of this highly charged, politicised reality. And the Pharisees and the Herodians work together because they are both opposed to Jesus: they see Jesus as both a political *and* a religious threat. Tell us teacher ...is it religiously lawful to pay taxes to the pagan empire? If the answer comes yes, then Jesus must be a collaborator. If the answer comes 'no' – he's a zealot causing trouble. Either way, they can report him to the authorities and have done with him.

Jesus knows what they are up to. And their hypocrisy is blatant: they handle the graven image as they hold out the coin before him.

'Whose image is on the coin?' Jesus demands. They answer: 'Caesar's.'

And then as ever, Jesus infuriatingly doesn't answer their question!

He offers a sentence which has left them and us with brain ache ever since. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and give to God the things that are God's."

So, what belongs to God? The whole creation, the earth and every creature in it, everything belongs to God. And the good book declares that each one of us, bears the image of God.

The coin bears the image of the sovereign. We bear the image of God.

So, what belongs to God?

Well if God holds *everything* then *we* belong to God *alone*.

Yet what do we do with the various coins we like to call *our* money? How do we relate to *our* Government, *our* churches, *our* possessions, ...*our* golden calves? Like the Pharisees and the Herodians I want to give one thing to Caesar and another thing to my church, and another thing to my political allies, as if it all belongs *to me* in the first place!

Of course, some think we should simply separate politics and religion. Give Caesar what is his and give God what is Gods. Keep the worldly stuff out of the spiritual stuff. It's cleaner that way.

But Jesus is not interested in keeping it clean and he's not interested in the ways we try to twist his words to justify ourselves politically or religiously. He's not interested in our excuses. He wants *our whole lives*, he wants all our money, he demands all our allegiances and he desires all our love. He'll take our fears and even our sins. What we do with our whole selves and that includes our money, our taxes, our giving, and yes, our support of those who have fallen into debt: this is where it begins.

Soon Jesus will be arrested, tried and executed and everything in his short passionate life and death is political and everything in his eternal passionate life and death belongs fully to God.

Jesus, the one whose face, whose very self, reveals to us the face of God. The one who holds and reconciles *all* humanity, making peace between Herodians and Pharisees, Jews and Gentiles, male and female, rich and poor. Such love demands our all. Amen.

Music for Reflection: May the mind of Christ my saviour

1 May the mind of Christ my Saviour
live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling
all I do or say.

2 May the word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through his power.

3 May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in everything,
that I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.

4 May the love of Jesus fill me,
as the waters fill the sea ;
him exalting, self forgetting —
this is victory.

5 May I run the race before me,
strong and brave to face the foe,
looking only unto Jesus
as I onward go.

Prayers of Intercession *(A time of silence may follow each petition)*

Holy God, you have provided all we have needed. We come in gratitude for your goodness. You have walked alongside us as we have journeyed through the wilderness and the valley and as we have climbed to the heights of the mountain.

Remember those who are dear to us. Wrap your steadfast love around them, sustain them in times of trouble, and keep them always in your care.

Remember the Church of Jesus Christ. Enable and free us to proclaim the gospel, through our love in action, through our hope in you.

Remember the nations of the world. Send your Spirit to renew the earth, convict our hearts and empower us to work for justice and for peace. May your love be known in all the world.

Holy God you have made us in your image., and we belong to you alone. Therefore, we offer ourselves to you, in service, love and praise. Use us for the good of your people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn H&P 51

My God, how wonderful Thou art,
Thy majesty, how bright;
How beautiful Thy mercy seat
In depths of burning light!

How dread are Thy eternal years,
O everlasting Lord,
By prostrate spirits day and night
Incessantly adored!

How beautiful, how beautiful,
The sight of Thee must be;
Thy endless wisdom, boundless power,
And awesome purity!

O how I fear Thee, living God,
With deepest, tenderest fears;

And worship Thee with trembling hope,
And penitential tears!

Yet, I may love Thee, too, O Lord,
Almighty as Thou art;
For Thou hast stooped to ask of me
The love of my poor heart!

No earthly father loves like Thee,
No mother, e'er so mild,
Bears and forbears as Thou hast done,
With me, Thy sinful child.

Father of Jesus, love's Reward!
What rapture it will be
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
And gaze, and gaze on Thee!

The Blessing...

May the God whose longing is for justice and whose passion is for the freedom of all, strengthen us to work for all that makes for peace; and the blessing of the living God, creator, redeemer and Spirit, be with us all, now and always. **Amen**

...and Commission

Go out in peace to serve the Holy God in love and justice, and always in praise:
God of glory come to us.
God of glory, stay with us.
God of glory, travel with us.
God of glory, lead us home. Amen

Some material sourced and adapted:

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