



Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 22 October 2023

READINGS

Exodus 33: 12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10; Matthew 22: 15-22

Greetings to our online congregation. Welcome, and may God be with you during this time of worship.

Politics, politics, politics. Are we ever free of them? I don't mean only the government, and our country is gearing up for an election next year. Already commentators, editors, and various opinion makers are holding forth, and we don't even know the date of the election yet. But what has come to be called "politics" exists everywhere. We most likely are going to find some sort of politics in the synod which will be held next weekend. These days you have to know the culture of the company for which you work, or the school you attend, or the family into which you marry, and you are expected to fit in. To do this successfully, you need to know who is related to whom, whom you need to cosy up to, what clothes to wear, and what not to say. You need to keep quiet in certain circumstances, and you need to make your support known in others. And if you go home feeling just a little bit dirty because you have not only betrayed yourself, but you have betrayed some valuable principles too, you tell yourself that that's the way it goes, and you distract yourself with a stiff drink and a bit of rubbish on TV.

Politics was rife in the time of Jesus too. The Romans were the ruling foreign power, Herod was to all intents and purposes a Jewish leader within the dictates of Roman rule, but he looked after himself very well, and the Priests, Sadducees and Pharisees were the watchdogs for the Jewish Law, to see that, under these difficult circumstances, the Jews kept to their traditions and legal requirements. And those that didn't have other occupations, got paid – with taxes. And in this mix, Jesus spoke the unvarnished truth, all the time. So if you were unaware of your sin, Jesus made you aware. If you were greedy, Jesus preached about wealth. If you were power-hungry, Jesus knew that and spoke of responsibility held by the hierarchy for the poor in their community. Not a wonder he was hated by those who managed, by careful manipulation of the politics, to survive and do so to their own financial and social benefit.

At the bottom of this pile was the majority of the population, the middle class and the workers and the beggars and every other non-influential category. They were paid little, and 49% of it went on taxes. Taxes to Herod to maintain the Jewish Kingdom – whatever that meant. Taxes to the temple to maintain the priests, the buildings and everything that went with worship and sacrifice. And taxes to the Romans. An income tax, which was a percentage of what they earned, another tax, a percentage of all their oil and grain, and a poll tax of one Denarius which every man between the ages of 9 and 65 had to pay, and every woman between the ages of 12 and 65 had to pay. This poll tax was equal to one day's pay. Everyday life was consumed with making enough money to live, and to keep these extortionate tax demands satisfied.

So some angry Pharisees and their competitors, the Herodians came to Jesus, to catch him out, and note the cloying words "teacher," or "Rabbi," and "we know you are a man of integrity." Oh yes? Jesus was not fooled and roundly called them a bunch of hypocrites. The question was clever. Should they be obedient and pay taxes to Caesar, who called himself "Lord" and expected to be worshipped as such? If Jesus answered "yes," it would mean he was siding with Rome, and his followers would see him as a hypocrite.

If he said “no”, he would be seen as a revolutionary, and the Roman officials would deal with him very quickly and effectively.

Jesus’ answer was just as clever. He asked for a coin, asked them to identify the head stamped on it, and they did – Caesar’s. Then Jesus said give to Caesar what was his, and give to God what was God’s. Some of his hearers would have heard a clever separation of church and state – Caesar, or God. But those who had been listening to him carefully over a long period of time, would know that he was always preaching the Kingdom of heaven where God ruled. And if God ruled everything, God would also be superior to Rome. So while they paid the Roman taxes which paid for the roads and the administration and everything else that government did, actually, what belonged to Caesar was limited. What belonged to God was way, way more and it would encompass all parts of life – including Rome.

Now if Jesus was facing similar questions in our own time, as his followers, what would we be hearing? And how would we understand the Kingdom of Heaven? I think the answer lies in our Reading from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. He is so grateful to them, because they heard what he preached, they followed his example, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, were living totally awesome Christian lives – so much so that they were known and admired all over eastern Europe. You see, Jesus did not teach rules. Jesus taught principles. Love your enemy. Forgive over and over again. Don’t set up too much store by wealth. Share what you have. Treat everyone, Romans, Samaritans, whoever, with respect. Heal when you need to, even if it involves taking up the cudgels on behalf of someone with either their medical aid, or within the chaos of our state hospitals. So when it comes to taxes? Pay what you owe to the relevant authority and remember to whom you belong – and pay the taxes to God in terms of donations to those charities which are doing what you cannot do, and to the church so that, feeble as it seems to have become in recent years, at least somewhere the words of Jesus are kept alive.

Let us look again at what our Christian principles are. As we rejoice with our new confirmands, let us remember when we were young and we made those promises. Do we even remember what they were? And in our cynical, toxic and political environment do we know the principles of Jesus, and are we keeping them? And as a community of the church, how are we building one another up? If you read the chapter after today’s Thessalonians reading, you learn that Paul is explaining why he can’t be with them just yet. So they were without a rector too! Are we a hotbed of Christian living as they were, filled with the Holy Spirit, doing so much good that the Methodists and Presbyterians down the road, and all the businesses in the area, as well as the primary schools and high school near us, are all buzzing with the wonder of our parish and empowered by the same Holy Spirit are similarly inspired? There’s no reason why we all shouldn’t be as active. We just need to get organized.

Let us remember when our country was like that. When we held our first democratic elections, and during president Mandela’s time of office, we were a shining light in the world. What Christian principles inspired us then? And as we go into the next election, what principles are going to inspire our politics so that we might again become a great nation. Maybe a look at our Rugby team and our international swimmers can give a glimpse of what we are capable of. With the same dedication, hard work, focus, and determination not to leave our Lord and Saviour EVER, we can become the beacon of hope for this struggling Body of Christ in our society, and by extension the whole world. and then, at a Christmas in the not too distant future, we can say “Peace on Earth, Good will towards all people” and not be talking about a Christmas card. Remember, Kingdom of God IS a reality - NOW. We are God’s people in that kingdom NOW. Let’s take that seriously, and live according to Jesus’ kingdom principles.