



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Do you belong to any groups or organisations which are particularly important to you? How do these things shape your priorities in life?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to bring your thanksgivings and praises to God, with the following as a possible conclusion:

God of all creation, everything there is belongs to you,
and the good gifts we enjoy come from you.

Receive our thanks and praises, we pray.

In the name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 96

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous works among all the peoples.
For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
**The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved
and he will judge the peoples with equity.'**
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it;
then the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord;
for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth.
**He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.**
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Reading Matthew 22:15 – 22

Sermon

I wonder if you've ever found yourself in a situation where someone has asked you a question, and whether they meant to do so, or not, it puts you in an impossible position. If you say 'yes' then you'll upset one group of people, and if you say 'no' others will be angry. It feels like a no-win situation. One of the skills which journalists need when they interview politicians, and others in authority, is the ability to ask questions that force the interviewee to take a stand on the issues in hand. There is nothing wrong with that per se; part of the role of the press is to hold those in power accountable. However, if this is done simply to trip somebody up or make them look bad, then it oversteps the mark, and it becomes something else. There is a real difference between encouraging someone off the fence, and entrapment.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus found himself facing what seemed like a no-win situation with people deliberately trying to trap him into saying something that they could use against him. The action takes place in the courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple, and follows on from Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, laden with symbolism which any alert Jew would've recognised: here was the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel. The Chief Priests and Elders demanded to know by whose authority he'd overturned the tables of the moneychangers and was now teaching the crowd in *their* space. Three pointed parables later, they'd backed off, but others stepped up to take their place, and put him to the test. This passage forms one of four confrontations which occurred between Jesus and various groups with axes to grind...

In this scene, an 'unholy alliance' had been formed between a group of Pharisees, who represented the religious establishment, and the Herodians, who represented the puppet government whose strings were pulled by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Up to that point, those seeking the opportunity to arrest Jesus had proven unable to

do so, because the crowds viewed him as a prophet, and so moving against him would've resulted in civil unrest – just what they wanted to avoid with Pilate in town. They figured that joining with the enemy offered a chance to catch Jesus out, forcing him to either put himself in the Roman firing line, or risk the wrath of the crowds. After getting one of their disciples to offer some flattering words – presumably to try to lull Jesus into a false sense of security – their trap was sprung: is it lawful to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?

This was a nasty trick question: if Jesus said 'yes' then he'd be seen as yet another collaborator with Rome, another traitor, but if instead, he said 'no', then he'd be branded a radical, a revolutionary, a rebel. People like that tended to meet sticky ends; about twenty years prior to this incident, in 6 CE, Judas of Galilee led a violent uprising which involved a boycott of Roman taxes. Mass crucifixions followed, with crosses scattered throughout the countryside, making the point that the 'tribute' payable by every man, woman and slave to the Emperor was not optional! So, how did Jesus respond to this trick question?

He asked the Pharisees for a denarius, the Roman coin used to pay the tax, which was about equivalent to the daily wage for a labourer. These Roman coins had the image of Caesar imprinted upon them, and the inscription called him the son of a god; this was offensive in the extreme for the Jewish people, with both the words and imagery contradicting the commandments given via Moses (Exodus 20:4) to have no other gods but YHWH and to forsake graven images. I can't help but wonder how the crowd reacted to the Pharisees – some of who were so opposed to paying these taxes (because it violated the holiness laws against collaboration with any foreign rulers) that they joined in another rebellion in 66 CE – carrying these idolatrous coins around with them in the Temple! When they confirmed whose image it was, Jesus told them to give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God. It was a masterstroke – one which left his opponents amazed! – but what was Jesus actually saying? This

issue lies at the very heart of the passage, and it takes us deep into highly contested and complex territory.

Some have argued, based on texts like Leviticus 25:23 and the first verse of Psalm 24, that Jesus advocated not paying the tax because everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar. Some have taken the exact opposite view, however; based on Paul's arguments from Romans 13:1 – 7 and Peter's words in 1 Peter 2:13 – 17, they claim that Jesus of course wanted people to pay this tax, because Roman government was sanctioned by God. I'm not convinced by either of these readings, not least as I doubt that both the Pharisees and the Herodians would have been satisfied with Jesus's answer if this was indeed the case. Barbara Reid and Jeannine Brown both argue that Jesus sidesteps the trap laid for him while asserting that our primary loyalty must be to God. Moreover, and unlike Caesar, Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9) of all creation. Other things try to lay claim to us, but our first allegiance must be to the Kingdom of God. Tom Wright has a similar point, suggesting that Jesus's answer to the taxes question was simultaneously 'both and neither'. His was a careful middle way between violent rebels at one extreme, and sell-outs to Rome at the other, which was about much more than wriggling out of a tight spot. For Wright, the key here is that the cross and resurrection *will* defeat Caesar, but not in the way religious zealots wanted or expected...

I think there is a lot to be said for the latter explanation together with the note that this passage was never trying to be the last word about the relationship between Christianity and politics. We have to be so careful about placing more weight into any one text than it can bear, and for what it's worth, readings suggesting that these two fields are mutually exclusive owe more to Enlightenment dogma than the New Testament! Moreover, I suspect those contending upon the basis of this passage that God does not care about mundane things like how we use our money, or that government must always be obeyed, are reading their own political bias into the text. Jesus clearly had much

to say about simultaneously worshipping God and mammon (wealth and possessions), and while Isaiah 45:1 – 7 shows God working via the authority of a ruler (Cyrus the Great), there are biblical examples aplenty of God calling people in power to account.

So, what can we take away from all of this? Well, in the spirit of what I've just said, I am reluctant to build political theologies, or wade into debates about the boundaries of religious freedom in a secular state at a time when political polarisation is rife, and the authority of God's claimed for opposing views on a range of contentious issues, on the basis of this text alone. There's always the risk of projecting our own concerns onto God, as if we know God's will and it happens to agree with our views! Perhaps, as we deal with life in a messy world where the paths of righteousness aren't always clear and we can feel we're in no win situations, the best we can do is to keep in mind that Jesus truly is Lord, and that discernment is a practice best shared with the other members of the Body of Christ.

The latter is especially important, as very few of us are blessed with the capacity for navigating difficult situations which Jesus displayed, and we need others to help us in navigating the challenges of being a disciple of Christ in everyday life. When I worked for a major bank, I was once asked to do something I felt was basically dishonest, but I knew that it was likely to prove costly for me if I refused. What was hardest about that situation was the lack of support from Christians, as if my profession blinded them to my desire to figure out and seek to do the 'right thing'. Thankfully, in that scenario, my line manager's support meant I kept my job, but I've never forgotten feeling that we need to be far better at helping one another discern what a Kingdom pathway looks like in testing times. As few of us will have the 'luxury' of never facing 'no win' situations, maybe the bottom line here is not a neat 'formula' about faith and politics, but more a call to make time to engage with the messiness of a world of conflicting priorities, and to help one another get through, with love, care and wisdom. Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of costly and self-giving love,
you call us to be people of integrity and justice,
pointing to you in all of our words and actions.
We bring to you those things in need of renewal
in our own lives, and in the life of the world we share:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

The Kyries are played for a few moments...

God of costly and self-giving love,
you call us to be people of integrity and justice
who point to you in our words and actions.
Thank you that you set us free to follow you,
and to be ambassadors for your Kingdom of love.
Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of courage and imagination,
we bring our prayers for the world you have created to you,

trusting in the power of your love to renew and make whole.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people surviving in places of war and conflict,
we pray for sanctuary, peace and the courage to keep going.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people living in regions blighted by natural disasters,
we pray for timely aid, safety and the strength to rebuild.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people exercising power and authority over others,
we pray for wisdom, compassion and selfless service.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people without a safe home in which to live and rest,
we pray for good housing, freedom from abuse and hope.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people who cannot find peace due to mental ill health,
we pray for security, calm and the support needed to recover.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people seeking to share the good news of God's love,
we pray for commitment, resilience and integrity of living.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people facing illness, anxiety or loneliness today,
we pray for healing, comfort and meaningful connection.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of quiet, we offer our own personal prayers...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing