

**A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 18 October 2020  
- 'Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost'**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 18 October, the twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Mandy for their help in preparing this week's edition.

A significant part of this podcast material was to be delivered this weekend in worship at both Foleshill Road URC and Keresley URC, Coventry, but self-isolation after close contact last week with friends who found out on Thursday that they have the Covid virus means this will not now happen. We think of those trying to maintain worship in all methods and media in these difficult times.

**Introductory Music<sup>1</sup>** –        *The Heart Asks Pleasure First / The Promise*  
by Michael Nyman  
from the soundtrack album *The Piano*

**Call to Worship:**        A responsive setting of verses from Psalm 96  
Taken from the Iona Abbey Worship Book (2017 edition)  
Published by the Iona Community; reproduced by permission

**Sing a new song, all the earth; sing a new song to God.**

Sing and bless the holy name; let God's salvation be praised each day.

Declare God's glory among the nations, tell all people what God has done.

God is great, deserving of worship, worthy of praise more than worldly idols.

Earthly deities are custom-built, but God is the Maker of all.

**Sing a new song, all the earth; sing a new song to God.**

Honour and splendour belong to God in whose sanctuary are beauty and strength.

Give God the glory, you families of nations, offering your gifts in God's house.

Praise the Creator, clothed in holiness; tremble with reverence, all the earth.

Say to the nations, 'Our God reigns.  
The world is stable; it shall not be moved; God will judge it with fairness'.

**Sing a new song, all the earth; sing a new song to God.**

Picking up themes from our psalm, our hymn is 'To God be the Glory'

**Hymn:**        *To God be the Glory* by Fanny Jane Crosby (1820-1915)  
sung by the Celebration Choir  
from the album *The Best Hymns Album In the World... Ever!*

To God be the glory, great things he hath done,  
so loved he the world that he gave us his Son,  
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,  
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the earth hear His voice;  
praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the people rejoice;  
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,  
and give him the glory; great things He hath done.*

Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood;  
to every believer the promise of God;  
the vilest offender who truly believes,  
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Great things he hath taught us, great things he  
hath done,  
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
but purer, and higher, and greater will be  
our wonder, our transport when Jesus we see.

*Praise the Lord...*

*Praise the Lord...*

## **Prayers**

We turn to God in prayer – let us pray.

Dear Lord, sometimes we don't know what day it is.

Sometimes we lose track of time, either because we are too busy or – sometimes –  
because we occupy our days with the same mundane cycle of activities and somehow  
mistake either how much or how little time has passed.

Your ancient people received a rule that asked them to keep a day holy – separate,  
dedicated to you. Forgive us when we find that difficult. Forgive us when Sunday creeps up  
on us. Forgive us – when we completely fail to make your day special.

Yet we know that each and every day is a better day when we have turned our minds to  
you. In these Covid times, across the internet and through various media we can be flexible  
in when we worship. May we never flex your worship out of sight or make it a less frequent  
focus. But we thank you that we can turn to you now. Receive this sacrifice of time and  
attention. Show us something new in your scripture and bless us with a renewed resolution  
to serve you.

For you are good and great and loving and through your Son an example of how our  
human lives can be lived. In times of adversity, in times of national emergency. And in  
times when we are not sure what day it is.

Forgive us our shortcomings. Deliver us from inattention and frustration. Inspire us to follow  
Jesus – in whose words we gather together and offer all our prayers.

## **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. And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and  
ever. Amen.*

Before we hear our scripture, a sung prayer for the Word of God to be heard and understood:

**Song:**           *Send out your light, Lord, send your truth* by John L Bell  
                          sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community  
                          from the album *Come all you people*.

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript.]

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:**           Matthew 22.15-22

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. <sup>16</sup> They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.

"Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. <sup>17</sup> Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the tax to Caesar or not?"

<sup>18</sup> But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for paying the tax."

They brought him a denarius, <sup>20</sup> and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" <sup>21</sup> "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

## Reflection (1)

The Gospel story today is one of those whose central message lives on in the English speaking world in the form that came to us by courtesy of King James the 6th and 1st. The Authorised Version account of Jesus responding to these crafty Pharisees' question – is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar?.

His response – *render unto to Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's*.

"Render" – an odd word to use today, and our different modern versions of Scripture take care of us by using others – in the New International Version we have "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's". In the Good News Bible, "Pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay God what belongs to God."

I think for once we lose something in the re-translation.

In the first part the word "Caesar" was very often almost a substitute for the word God in the Roman world. You may remember from years ago on TV Derek Jacobi as *I Claudius* - Claudius the God. John Hurt as the mad Caligula who made one of his horses a Senator, and thought that he was himself a re-incarnation of Zeus. And of course Brian Blessed playing the divine Augustus the same way he played every other role from Z Cars to Cats.

But I digress. the point is there was a real balance in the words that Jesus chose to use, and for once I suspect the Authorised Version got it exactly right. Caesar on the one hand, God on the other.

And “render”. It’s not just “give” and it’s not just “pay”. Because sometimes we *give* people things as gifts, by surprise and with joy in the giving. But here the payment that Jesus is talking about is the result of an obligation – it’s a tax, it’s a debt.

You ought to understand why this was perceived to be such a difficult question.

The Jewish nation had not been used to running its own affairs for quite a long time, by the time Jesus came on the scene. In the previous five centuries or so, there had only been a period of about 75 years in which you might say that Palestine had been an independent state.

The Roman conquest in 63BC and the period of national autonomy before that would be unlikely to be within the living memory of any members of Jesus’ community.

Full nationhood was a folk-memory, not in memory, but there was still resentment. And even the Pharisees would have been generally against the idea of the Romans being in charge, though generally in favour of a quiet life. But the writer of the Gospel has them coming to Jesus allied with the Herodians – the people of Herod’s party – who were definitely pro-Roman, since it was the Romans who kept Herod on the throne.

Should the Temple tax be paid?

Two problems with paying this. One, it was “tribute to Caesar”, a tax imposed by the Roman overlords, so the Zealots, the nationalists would want Jesus to say “no”. Also the coin had on it a picture of the Emperor – which would be Tiberius. So this was a “graven image” which the strict religious Jews would resent having associated with their Temple. And worse, the inscription on it would have asserted that Tiberius was son of a God (by which they meant the Emperor Augustus).

One Son of God was holding the coinage of someone who claimed themselves to be the son of a god. What would happen next?

We already know, so it’s not really a cliffhanger. But we’ll pause for a moment.

**Music:** 1917, by Thomas Newman  
from the original soundtrack album of the film, 1917

## Reflection (2)

If Jesus were to align himself with the anti-Roman faction, he’d be a legitimate target for the Romans. The Jewish leaders could inform on him and be rid of him. Yet if he aligned himself with the Romans, the nationalist tendency would disown him, and he might even become a target for *them*.

So he chose the middle way. And a way that taught a lesson.

Question: “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Answer: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Verse 22 When they heard this, they were amazed.

You can almost imagine someone saying, *so we’ll take that as a yes, then?*

When I've heard people preach on this text before, there has been a comparison drawn with us paying our taxes. But I'm not sure that we've got such an exact parallel. For nothing we do, nothing the state obliges us to do has quite the same impact as the Temple tax.

Where does our church stand on this? As we all get to hear from time to time, the United Reformed Church makes an assertion every time someone is ordained or inducted, which goes like this:

*"We believe that Christ gives his Church a government distinct from the government of the state. In things that affect obedience to God, the Church is not subordinate to the state, but must serve the Lord Jesus Christ, its only King and Head. Civil authorities are called to serve God's will of justice and peace for all humanity, and to respect the rights of conscience and belief."*

This Free Church, then, distinguishes between its own government and that of the state, but would want both church **and** state to serve the world under God's guidance and in response to his calling. And here's where we perhaps discover that the message of Jesus' clever answer for us today is not a clear-cut division of obligation.

We are **not** able to say – OK, so much time and energy and effort and resource can go one way – this slice, that's God's. And so much time and energy and all the rest of it goes another way – that's Caesar's, that bit belongs to the state.

For there are other sayings of Jesus around. Look at the way he summed up the Old Testament Law, later in Matthew chapter 22, as it happens

*"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". **All** your heart. **All** your soul. **All** your mind. Not just that bit of it that you can spare from paying taxes and going to work and raising a family and going on holiday and playing football and watching TV. **All** of it.

And since we are not all hermits, monks or nuns, we live our lives on the assumption that God can cope with us doing all of these things. Just as Jesus could cope with his fellow countrymen paying Temple Tax. As one of my commentaries rather tortuously puts it, "*Jesus, without reducing the demands of loyalty to God, indicates that political allegiance even to a pagan state is not incompatible with it.*" We like to divide our lives into "God-related things" and "other", but we need to recognise that the "other" lies inside God's world too.

And what a lot of "other" there is.

So we need to find a way to balance what we do. It's almost the definition of the non-stipendiary minister's calling. I used to joke that I was an engineer by day and somehow turned into a minister at evenings and weekends. But I was and am a minister all the time.

And those who today or in the past take on or have taken on the rights and responsibilities of Church membership are not just church members at evening meetings and at Sunday services. It's an all-enveloping context in which we live our lives.

So if we were to draw a picture, a so-called Venn diagram of how all this works out, it wouldn't be two separate circles representing God's things and the state's things, Caesar's things.

And it wouldn't even be two circles that overlap, where sometimes we bring God's concerns to bear on the state's problems or ill-doings or needs.

No, it would be a great big wide – even infinite area representing God’s concerns, and a circle somewhere inside it, representing what is Caesar’s.

You can’t put God in a box. You can’t actually limit the things that are God’s. We should be rendering him everything. For we owe him - everything.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God our Father,

We bring before you our prayers for the church and for the world. It’s been another difficult week, when the future seems unclear and all that seems certain is that the restrictions placed on us will increase again in the coming days, weeks and months. Help us as we try to identify the right places to focus our thoughts, our time, our energy.

When we worry about material things, like potential shortages in the shops, help us instead to think about those who provide the commodities we crave. Producers in other parts of the world, who may be facing much tougher times than us, and worries about selling what they grow or make. People facing extremes of weather, and lack of shelter and safety. People who have been displaced from their homes by war, famine or economics, facing the global pandemic when they have very few resources.

When we worry about restrictions on our freedoms, like the chance to greet our friends, embrace those we love, and even to sing out loud, help us instead to think about those who rarely or never have these joys. We bring before you the residents in care homes, deprived of normal visits for so many months, and people living far from their family or living alone and enduring too much solitude. Be with all struggling with anxiety about the future, or finding it difficult to cope.

When we worry about what the future holds, and when we will be able to live more normally again, help us instead to think about those without a future. We think of those who are ill and facing periods of treatment, and of those for whom time is now limited. We pray for any who are bereaved or who know they may be facing bereavement soon. Be with all who suffer through their own illness or through the illness of someone they love. Help us all to remember that you are always there and that you will never let us down.

When we are torn by conflicting demands placed on us by our government or by people closer to us, help us always to remember that it is you that we serve. You to whom we owe everything we have. Help us to see how we can best serve you, now and in the future.

Amen.

**Hymn**            *God of the poor (Beauty for brokenness)*  
                         sung by Graham Kendrick  
                         from the album *Graham Kendrick, the Ultimate Collection*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don’t permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript, although they may be found online if you are so equipped, and are certainly in a number of current hymnbooks.]

### **Blessing**

In a complex and demanding world, may God always grant us wisdom to know how to allocate our resources and divide our time, to follow Christ’s example and his laws.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

**Music:** *Thaïs: Méditation religieuse* by Jules Massenet  
performed by Nigel Kennedy & the National Philharmonic Orchestra  
conducted by Richard Bonyngne

Thank you for listening to our podcast. Although some of our churches are resuming worship in the church buildings, at present it is our hope to continue podcast production until my retirement from the pastoral ministry at the end of 2020, so long as there is a demand. We always welcome feedback, suggestions, and volunteers to read. A full archive of all of our podcasts is on our website [<https://revdbill.uk>].

### Credits

*The Heart Asks Pleasure First / The Promise* by Michael Nyman was taken from the soundtrack album for the film *The Piano*

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and *Thaïs: Méditation religieuse* by Jules Massenet was performed by Nigel Kennedy and the National Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Richard Bonyngne

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition