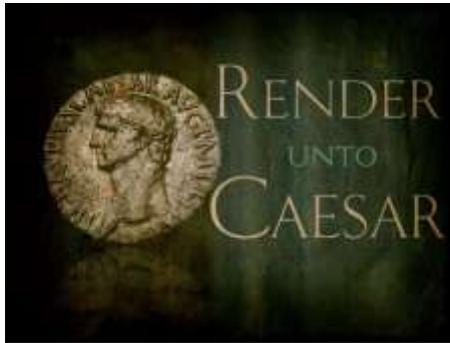


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 18th October 2020



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

Sing to the Lord, and praise him,
proclaim his glory to all the world,
for the Lord is great and highly to be praised.
Sing to the Lord, sing a new song to the Lord.
Holy Spirit, be among us as we meet to worship,
as we sing and as we read,
as we listen and as we speak,
as we hear and come to know,
as we learn and begin to understand.
Holy Spirit, be among us.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 45 v1-7 (p731) I am the Lord, and there is no other ...

Psalms 96 v1-9, (10-13) (p602) Sing to the Lord a new song ...

1 Thessalonians 1 v1-10 (p1186) Thanksgiving for the
Thessalonians' Faith

Matthew 22 v15-22 (p990) Paying Taxes to Caesar

Imitators & Influencers

This week our focus is on living a life worth imitating.

Paul and his companions gratefully greet those who responded joyfully to their gospel message. The Holy Spirit empowered the proclaiming and receiving of the word, and the faith, hope and love at work in the community are already inspiring others who hear of them.

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah we hear how Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire that ended the Babylonian captivity, is described as God's anointed (messiah). He is the only non-Israelite designated by a title usually reserved for Israel's kings and high priests. It was in exile from Jerusalem, in the sixth century BC, that Israel was enabled to see 'the Lord' as God of the whole world, calling Cyrus by name, 'though you do not acknowledge me' (v4).

It is likely that the prologue to the Scriptures, Genesis 1–11, also comes from this time. God here tells Cyrus, 'I form the light and create darkness' (v7), and the rare word for 'create' is mainly found in Isaiah 40–66 and Genesis 1–6. The opening chapters of Genesis set the story of Israel in the context of God's concern for all humanity, made 'in our image' (1 v26) and blessed by a universal covenant (9 v1-17). So, Abraham is told, 'all the peoples of earth will be blessed through you' (12 v3), and now Cyrus the

foreigner is told that he is anointed for the sake of Israel and will himself come to know that he is called by the Lord.

And now to the New Testament. 'Paul, Silas and Timothy' worked together, travelling from Lystra in central Turkey to Thessalonica and Beroea, in northern Greece. Their letter is to the church (*ekklēsia*, at this stage probably meaning simply 'assembly'). 'Of the Thessalonians', rather than 'in Thessalonica', is unusual. A current coin had Julius Caesar's head and 'God' on one side and Augustus' head and 'of the Thessalonians' on the other. But our Thessalonians owe their identity not to Rome but to 'God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. Already in this earliest Christian writing, a mere 20 years after the crucifixion, naming Jesus as Lord and God as Father belong intimately together.

Acts says the apostles preached in the synagogue, persuading Jews and their Greek adherents, but the letter suggests the community they established was entirely Gentile, since they 'turned to God from idols'. Jewish Scripture is not quoted, nor are issues of concern to Jewish Christians (e.g. the Law) discussed. The apostles rejoice that the Holy Spirit that empowered them now works in the Thessalonians' faith and love, sustained by their hope of Jesus' return. Imitating the apostles and the Lord – whose faith, hope and love were not conquered by death – they become examples for others. At this stage, the faithful were themselves the only gospel that could be read.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 22, this is the first of Jesus' four final debates in the Temple with Jewish leaders. Moving from politics in this world to resurrection in the next, from understanding the Law to identifying the Messiah, they set Jesus' imminent death and resurrection in the context of his authority to interpret and teach his Jewish inheritance, faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (22 v32). 'Is it right to pay taxes to

Caesar or not?' is such a question of interpretation. Many interpreted the holiness laws of the promised land to forbid collaboration with foreign rulers, and the imposition of Roman taxes collected through registration of property led to a revolt at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2 v1-7; Acts 5 v37). The continuing unrest would draw many Pharisees into another revolt from AD 66. But Herodians were among those willing to accommodate the law to current realities of Roman rule, even interpreting the traditions as allowing the emperor to provide a daily sacrifice in the Temple. Jesus affirms neither revolutionaries nor collaborators, leaving his listeners to work out their secondary obligations to rulers in the light of their primary loyalty to God. The Pharisees who criticised Jesus' association with those who collected the foreign tax may have regretted that they had introduced a Roman coin, with its blasphemous image and inscription, into the Temple itself, perhaps to the delight of the Herodians, their temporary partners in this unprincipled attempt to entrap Jesus.

The links between the lectionary readings

Isaiah explores Israel's vocation to teach all humanity what it means to serve God. Jesus invites his people to follow him in being faithful to Israel's God in a world under the secular rule of the Roman Empire. Paul tells the Gentile Thessalonians that by imitating Jesus Christ's faithfulness to God the Father, they are themselves examples of the transformative power of turning from idols to serve the God of life.

A Sending Out Prayer

Into a world of confusion and disbelief, into a world of welcome and rejection, we take the grace of God that has been among us, and the peace of God that has been on our hearts. **Amen.**