

Order of Service: 18th October 2020

Introit: Take this moment – Tyndale Singers

Call to Worship (as a candle is lit)

Holy Father, at the beginning you said,
'let there be light', and there was light.

**Yours is the light of every day since then:
we praise you.**

Holy Son, you are the light of the world.

**No follower of yours will ever walk alone in darkness,
but will have the light of life:
we praise you.**

Holy Spirit, you came to the first disciples
with power like tongues of fire.

**Yours is the courage that supports us now:
we praise you.**

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God to endless ages,
renew your light in our hearts,
scatter the shadows of evil
and kindle your flame of love among us. Amen.**

Paul Fiddes

Hymn: [Sing for God's Glory](#) (CG 111)

Prayer

God of majesty, power and light,
of glory and honour and fame;
God of wonder and mystery;
God of fire and passion;
God of poem, song and dance;
God of artist and architect;
God of engineer and artisan;
God of the smallest atom and the greatest galaxy;
God of adult and child;
God of every nation and every tribe;
God of every home and every community;
God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
to you we bring all that we are and offer ourselves in worship.
To you we pledge loyalty and praise, for you have done great things;
you have loved us with an everlasting love
and you have always stayed faithful to your promises.
and so we gather this day in response to all you have done
and we offer you our worship

Steve Finamore

Loving God, maker of all, **have mercy on us.**

Jesus Christ, servant of the poor, **have mercy on us.**

Holy Spirit, breath of life, **have mercy on us.**

Silence

Before God, with the people of God,
I confess to my brokenness:
to the ways I wound my life,
the lives of others and the life of the world.

**May God forgive you, Christ renew you,
and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.**

Amen

**Before God, with the people of God,
we confess to our brokenness;**

**to the ways we wound our lives,
the lives of others and the life of the world.**

May God forgive you, Christ renew you,
and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.

Amen

Iona Community

Old Testament Reading: [Exodus 33:12-23](#);

Comment

God has called Moses to go back to Egypt and set the Israelites free.

Moses is struggling. He doubts his calling and he doubts himself.

How do we know? We know because Moses asks God a question, a question that conveys a request: “how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?” (v. 16)

Moses asks, and receives – God answers him: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus once said to his disciples, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.” (Lk. 11: 9). For Moses, this promise seems to have been true in quite a literal way (“I will do the very thing that you have asked,” God says to him – v. 17)

But much of the time at least, I expect your experience has been like mine: asking, but not receiving the very thing for which I have asked.

A teacher of mine once preached a sermon on those words of Jesus: “Ask, and it will be given you.” In it, he explored why it is important that we ask God for things. His conclusion was as simple as it was profound: “If we were not told to ask for them, we should never have to face the fact that we wanted them.”

You see, “asking” makes us vulnerable, in a challenging but valuable way. Asking is like holding out a mirror and seeing our desires as an object before our eyes. What we discover can be a sobering experience (more often than not, if my experience is anything to go by): is *that* really what matters to us?

If Jesus had not told us to ask for things, we should never have to face the fact that we wanted them. Facing up to what our desires really look like – insecure, petty, needy, self-absorbed, as they often are – that can be a humbling experience. But it is a vital step on the path to a healing change, to having our desires reshaped by the God who promises “my presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

The responsive prayer of confession from the Iona community, that we shared in earlier, aims to help us on this path. It opens up a space for us to recognise what we so often discover when we see what we are asking for – our brokenness and our liability to cause harm. It reassures us that the lifeblood of all that we receive from God is forgiveness, renewal and the opportunity to grow in love.

Keep this in mind as you hear another drama unfold, this time from Matthew’s Gospel: a drama about ‘asking’ and ‘receiving.’

New Testament Reading: [Matthew 22:15-22](#)

Hymn: [Speak, O Lord, as we come to you.](#)

Sermon: The Emperor’s Smoke and the Spirit’s Mirrors

What you ask for can reveal uncomfortable truths about what you desire.

Powerful people ask Jesus a question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

- What do they *want* to receive?
- What are they *going* to receive?

What do they want to receive? The gleeful satisfaction of seeing Jesus squirm in public, of enjoying this troublesome teacher’s tongue-tied stutters. And as icing on this cake of shame, a forced answer that will mean trouble follows him for ever after. Trouble from the Romans if he says no, and word gets back to them that here is another rebel needing to be executed. Trouble from his support base if he says yes, and

word gets around that this so-called messiah lets the Caesars of the world have their way at the first sign of pressure: no more 'hosannas' for this Son of David. Does this political conundrum sound familiar?

Matthew, our narrator, leaves us in no doubt about what the Pharisees and Herod's stooges *want* to receive, nor that Jesus can see the true colour of their desires as soon as their devious question is out in the open. "Hypocrites" he calls them, and to make sure they really get the picture, Jesus has a request of his own.

Magicians performing their act sometimes ask for a prop from the audience as they prepare for a trick – a watch they will seem to smash, a coin that will apparently disappear, even a volunteer that the audience will hold their breath for when it looks like they are being sawn in half! Only when the magician has received the prop can the trick begin.

But here, the trick is already done as soon the hypocrites in power show Jesus a coin used for tax, the trick is done - the tables are turned before they even realise it. Just by reaching into their pockets and holding up a coin adorned with the Roman emperor's head, they have laid bare the true shape of their desires. And it is not a pretty sight!

You see the coin they held up, a denarius, was not a Jewish coin, it was a Roman coin, the only currency Rome would allow its tax to be paid with. Two more questions from Jesus emphasise the difference and underline the hypocrisy of these Pharisees and fans of Herod: "Whose image is this, and whose title?" The image on the coin is of the Roman emperor, they cannot deny it now. The emperor's title, as every onlooker would have known, was the inscription round the edge that declared him "son of God" and "high priest." So here they are, the self-proclaimed righteous of Israel, standing in the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple, holding up a coin renowned for being inscribed with idolatry, showing that *this* is the resource they carry with them. Their true allegiance is revealed. The image of Caesar was buried in their pockets; now everyone can see that, in truth, they have been in Caesar's pockets all along. Be careful what you ask for, if you are not ready for an uncomfortable answer!

Last week's episode of Radio 4's satirical show *The News Quiz* included an amusing moment when the voice of God was depicted interrupting the panelists. They had just drawn attention to the way Donald Trump had tried to bolster his status by announcing that his recent Covid infection was a blessing from God. A reverberating voice cuts into the scene. "God here," the voice declared, before making clear that Trump's illness was definitely not a blessing from God and going on to say: "Trump can have my blessing when he has actually read my book ... so far he seems not to have even skim-read the blurb on the back cover!"

Whatever the truth about Donald Trump's reading habits may be, it struck me that this satirical moment points to something important about our calling as the church, as the community of witnesses to Jesus' presence today. The mission God has called us to includes speaking out against hypocrisy. It includes naming and shaming the times when scripture or other sources of authority are being misused to gratify a lust for political power.

We are called, in the name of God, to hold the powerful to account. We are called to be angry when politicians entrusted with making laws to safeguard public health then break the rules to avoid inconvenience: that anger holds a mirror up to their betrayal. We are called to ask critical questions about who benefits and who suffers under any system for sharing the funds raised through taxes: those questions expose the gulf between today's reality and the promise of justice and joy for all that we seek whenever we pray "your kingdom come." I expect the weeks and months ahead will give us more cause to call out the failings of those in power, as restrictions and tensions rise, as the time we are living through continues to be tainted by a global pandemic.

It is tempting to leave it at that. It is tempting to sign off with a resounding message about exposing hypocrisy in the name of God. It is tempting to leave you fired up to shame those who indulge their addiction to prosperity and status, to capture their failings in the spotlight of that kingdom of justice and peace which Jesus reveals and for which we have been gathered. It is tempting, at least in part, because I imagine such a message would sit rather well with this congregation at Tyndale.

But that is not where this Gospel story ends. Jesus does not simply leave the Pharisees and Herodians with red faces and dropped jaws, their Roman coins burning with shame in their hands. They have more to receive from Jesus, just as our so very human leaders should receive more from us. Jesus has an aim that goes *beyond* shame. Jesus calls us to share that aim when we act in God's name.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” You see, there are two kinds of image on the scene here which seek to claim our lives. There is the image emblazoned on the Roman coin, a symbol for imperious powers in every age who offer a superficial peace by keeping injustice and exploitation muted, rewarding and punishing according to how much you slavishly play along with them. Jesus invites these shamed leaders to leave such idolatry with the Caesars of this world, where it belongs, and instead to answer the call of another image: “give to God what belongs to God.” And like the person searching for those reading glasses perched on top of her head, the discovery that matters is closer than they realise, but only a careful look into the mirror of God’s truth will reveal it, unsettling as that may be.

In fact, an honest read of the very first chapter of God’s book points the way. The book of Genesis, after picturing God populating creation with creatures of all kinds, proclaims the creation of the creature who will carry the blessing and responsibility of being the image of God on earth, God’s representative in flesh and blood, with a vocation to care for creation and enable it to praise the Creator by its vibrant life. That image, most fully known in Jesus of Nazareth – the image of the invisible God – is the image imprinted on every single one of us, on the Pharisees and Herodians exposed as hypocrites, on the powerful and privileged, and on the poor and exploited. As Brian Wren’s hymn puts it so well: “Your living likeness still we bear, though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed.”

“Ask, and you shall receive.” There are various reasons for asking things of God, and various motives can prompt us to do so. We can receive things from God in various ways when we ask, and one such thing is unsettling sight of the proverbial Roman coin with its image of our distorted desires, held up like a mirror to our souls. But the Gospel does not end there; this is but a step towards embracing a different image – the image of God still imprinted on our lives, the image of Christ into which we are being renewed, the truth that sets us free. The Christian writer Stanley Hauerwas neatly sums up the hope that is entwined in being disturbed by our failings. “If you are a disciple of Jesus,” he says, “you know you have problem ... when you don’t have a problem.” (*Commentary on Matthew*, p. 191)

We do not know whether, for the Pharisees and Herodians, this challenging encounter with Jesus proved to be a therapy for their malicious desires. Matthew only tells us that they went away amazed; we are left to hope their amazement was eye-opening. In Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, we see the rejoicing that can come from seeing people facing up to the truth that they have a problem. Paul is thankful because, by his ministry, these people discovered the message of the gospel, and “not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.” (1 Thess. 1: 5) There is more, Paul feeds back to them reports which declare, as he puts it, “how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.”

We share the faith and the frailties of those Christians in Thessalonica. We are called to ask, and we can expect to receive God’s love, a love that comforts and a love that exposes uncomfortable home truths so that we can find and live out the deepest truths about ourselves.

When I was a child growing up in East Kent, the local MP for our town was a man called Jonathan Aitken. Those of you who kept a keen eye on the news in the mid-90’s may remember his spectacular fall from grace, from cabinet minister to imprisonment and bankruptcy following a conviction for perjury and perverting the course of justice. A “serial liar” was what Private Eye called him – “hypocrite” would also have fitted the bill.

Listen to the way Aitken describes the effect of this profoundly painful, but profoundly life-changing, exposure in an autobiographical account he wrote years later:

“Inward change starts with asking the simply question: Who am I? For me it was an essential self-interrogation after falling from a mountain top of political power into a mine shaft of media opprobrium. That fall was so disorientating that for a time I did not know the answer to my own question. I tried on various stereotype hats, such as the misunderstood maker of a mistake, the resilient recoverer, the wronged victim, the comeback kid, the excessively punished teller of an unimportant lie, the determined career builder, and so on, but none of them fitted. In the end there was only one response to the question ‘who am I?’ with which I could live. It was: ‘I am a sinner who wants to repent.’ This cry for help did not go unheard.”

(Pride and Perjury, p. 359)

Jonathan Aitken is now a priest and prison chaplain.

Challenge hypocrisy, unmask injustice, shame the perpetrators, because exposing the truth shares in the mission of God. But as you do so, recognise that we all share a common frailty. We are all susceptible

to the powers that draw us into selfishness, into the desire for power and status, into carrying double-stands in the hidden pockets of our lives. Do so knowing that the mission of God has a purpose for which unmasking failure serves to pave the way for healing, for fresh signs of God's kingdom, present now but all in all in the time to come. Do so because you want to share in rejoicing, as our ranks of repentant hypocrites are swelled by the gracious, loving work of God's holy spirit, giving us that fullness of life together which reveals we belong to God.

Hymn: I waited patiently for God (CG 60) – Tyndale singers

Intercessions

Prayers interspersed with this response:

For all the world, Lord, **may your Kingdom come.**

Including prayers for:

- those who have lost, or fear losing, jobs
- Political leaders, health and social care professionals, carers
- Students, those infected with, or recovering from illness
- People and situations known to the congregation
- Ourselves

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

Offering and Prayer

Hymn: [God of Grace and God of Glory](#) (BPW 572)

Blessing

In work and worship, **God is with us.**

Gathered and scattered, **God is with us.**

Now and always, **God is with us.**

Iona Community