



Revd Ro's Reflection on 20th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 24

Year A

1 Thessalonians 1.1-10

Matthew 22.15-22

We have seen in the gospel readings, over the last few weeks, Jesus in the temple in his final days in Jerusalem. He, like thousands more, had come to celebrate the feast of the Passover; the temple would have been crowded with pilgrims. Jesus begins by over turning the tables of the money changers and those who sold the animals for sacrifice. He deals with corruption head on. But in a way this action is symbolic of the fact that Jesus over turns everything. His new kingdom is revolutionary. It is the kingdom of God here on earth. He is a threat to the established order. The authorities know it.

Firstly we have seen the 'chief priests and the elders' accost him, 'By what authority are you doing these things?' Roughly translated that is, how dare you, an upstart from Nazareth, come to God's holy sanctum where there is a hierarchy and set ways of worship, where people are in our power and teach! They are furious and full of envy and fear. Fear of losing power often leads directly to the destruction of the person who is the threat. Passions beat around Jesus on temple mount.

The authority of course is God's. If you think of it, Jesus, the presence of God has just entered the temple. Those who have eyes to recognise him will see that, just as Simeon and Anna did so long ago. The chief priests and the rest of them are blinded by their own self-interest and love of power. They cannot see the long awaited Messiah when he stands before them.

Jesus is not cowed by them but accuses them directly when he tells the parable of the vineyard. Now in this week's gospel it is the turn of the Pharisees and Herodian's, next week we will see how the Sadducees will renew the attack. It is tempting to see these sects as similar but actually they often held very different views and were often frankly opposed to each other. What unites them here is their opposition to Jesus! So they go into action,

¹⁶ 'So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.'

First come the wily words, totally belying their real opinion or motive. But of course Jesus is surrounded by supporters and those who regard him as of God if not the Messiah. Tread carefully is the name of the game and try to trap him. The easiest way is to get him into trouble with the occupying power. The Romans are the ones who can arrest him and put him to death. So the challenge about taxes is sprung.

¹⁷ 'Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'

They must have felt so smug, we've got him now; say yes and the people will be angry, say no and you are in trouble with the Romans. Actually their trap is so pathetic Jesus deals with it in a trice.

¹⁸ 'But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' ²¹ They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Jesus once again uses a few words to sum up his message. He dismisses their trap and teaches that the service of God must be at the heart of everything. He has not come to cause secular revolution. He has come to stir up a revolution in people's hearts so that they turn from their old ways and turn to God. Jesus offers a treasure that will not end; the kingdom of God. But as he has already said, these Jewish leaders, so full of malice and spite are miles away from it. The so called sinners are the ones who are turning to him and the kingdom will be theirs. Jesus swats the officials off like flies.

²² 'When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.'

So they retreat for the time being. Jesus knows he is walking the way of the cross, this is his last week on earth but he is in control at every stage. He will call the tune and he will go to the garden and the cross in his own time. Even after his arrest, when he should be helpless, Jesus is still in control and has a stature and nobility which even leads the hardened Pilate to look on him with something like respect and certainly see the truth. Yes they will drag Jesus to Calvary but the cross will become a throne and defeat death. Pilate writes the mocking title, 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews' but actually he is King of the cosmos. There our God won salvation for us all, beating down sin and death by love.

The epistle reading has moved to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, the set passage is the beginning of the epistle. To put it in its context we need to go back to look at Paul's missionary journey to understand the reading properly. Chapter one of Thessalonians begins,

¹ 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.'

Paul greets the Thessalonians from his co-workers for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He and Silas, (this is the Silvanus mentioned here) had been in Philippi and had preached the message there. Our reflections have dealt with passages from Paul's epistle to the Philippians. We know that both he and Silas were arrested and treated very badly. We have the miraculous story of their night in prison and their formal release when Paul declared his Roman citizenship. Paul mentions this in verse 2 of today's reading.

From Philippi Paul moved to Thessalonica. It is in northern Greece about two hundred miles north of Athens. Paul moved down to Athens after his time in Thessalonica and this letter was possibly written from Corinth. My cousin Jo lives in Athens, Jo can see the Parthenon from her window. It was the centre of Greek religious worship. Recently she climbed part way up Mount Olympus, she said it was awe inspiring and could see how the Greeks made it the home of the gods. The Greek gods were at the centre of life; there were temples and shrines everywhere. The Romans had conquered Greece and the same was true of Roman gods. These gods were fickle, wrathful and had to be constantly appeased by the fearful worshipers. Add to that the cult of Emperor Worship, because the Emperors had declared themselves gods. Woe betides anyone who did not acknowledge this as fact.

Paul and his co-workers come to Thessalonica after their departure from Philippi, having established a new community of Christians there. They come into that mixture of idol worship. They tell the Good News of the one true God, a God of love. They tell of his Son Jesus Christ, the God who became human and died for love of humanity and of his resurrection and of Salvation, the great gift of God freely given through grace. How counter cultural is that! Those people who joined the community of believers in Thessalonica were inspired by his words and committed themselves not only to a new belief but to the new way of life demanded of followers of 'The Way.'

Paul begins his letter by saying that he is praying for these new Christians. It is so important because prayer is at the centre of Christian life and these people need his prayers and God's help.

² 'We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly

³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'.

He mentions their love and faithfulness in their new Christian life. There is an obvious affection here and admiration for these new Christians. The next point he makes is so very important because it goes not just for these Christians but all of us.

⁴ 'For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.'

It is God who has chosen these people, it is God's Holy Spirit that will strengthen and sustain them in their Christian life. That is so true of us too. Anything we do in our lives as Christians we do with God's help because we are never alone.

These people need that strengthening love. I have talked about their world and its gods. By becoming Christians these people are in a very dangerous position. They will inevitably face persecution. In a land ruled by Romans if a person declared Jesus to be Lord, not Caesar, then they risked death.

Yet despite this not only do they continue to worship God but they are active in mission; so much so, says Paul, that 'the world' knows of Jesus Christ through them. Thessalonica was a busy sea port and on trading routes. These Christians were ideally placed to spread the Good News. People believed in Jesus because of them, Paul is clear about that. It is quite often the case that in a place where Christians face persecution the message spreads faster and those Christians are courageously steadfast in the faith they profess.

⁹ 'For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues.'

Paul knows the tribulation they will face but he commends their faith and indeed their mission. He inspires them with the fact that Jesus Christ is in control, and that God will establish his newly recreated order of justice and love and that Jesus will return as king.

'Love is his name, love is his law, hear his command all you that are his, Love one another as I have loved you.' Luke Connaughton

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