

The Vine at Home
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Call to worship

We draw near to you in worship
with this offering of praise,
our prayers for those in need
and our lives dedicated to your service.

Bless this time of fellowship,
and may the blessing we receive
be the gift that we share
as we leave this place. Amen.¹

Hymn: 81 STF – Now thank we all our God

Opening Prayers

Let us pray, As we gather in worship today let us reflect on the week we have had, on what we have given and what we have taken from it.

[silence]

Lord you give us so much, our family and friends, our churches and communities. You give us hope and comfort. You walk with us through the dark times and rejoice with us in the good.

In this moment, we offer you our thanks for all you have given us this week.

[silence]

Lord, all you ask is that we give to you what is yours. That we use the gifts you have given us for the good of your world. In the silence, let us reflect on our gifts and how we have used them this week.

[silence]

Lord, we are sorry for when we do not give our all in worship or service and keep our gifts to ourselves. Remind us in this moment to use our gifts for the common good.

[silence]

Lord, as we enter this time of worship, help us to reflect on how to give you praise through our worship and service. Inspire us to share your gifts and use them to build your kingdom on earth. Amen.²

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

¹ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Rachel Allison

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

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 labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. **4** For we know, brothers and sisters^[a] 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 and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. **6** And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, **7** so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. **8** For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. **9** For the people of those regions^[b] 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 us from the wrath that is coming.³

Matthew 22:15-22 - The Question about Paying Taxes

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” 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.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.⁴

Reflections on the readings:

Ordinary.

Or-di-nar-y - Adjective, ‘with no special or distinctive features; normal:’

With varying degrees of enthusiasm, churches follow a liturgical calendar as we make our way through the year. We may not all have pulpit falls and flowers that match the colours of the liturgical seasons, but we may be familiar with the shape that the liturgical year takes, as we are moved from moment to moment of the story of Jesus.

Currently, we are travelling through the season of ‘Ordinary Time’. It is not an inspiring name, but it has its merits.

For example, it is at least an accurate name, given that more than 30 weeks of the year are given to ‘Ordinary Time’! For leaders of worship and preachers, Ordinary Time can come as quite a relief, arriving with an audible sigh, as we settle into a slower pace, after the excitement of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, (a little bit of Ordinary Time) Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost.

³, ⁴ Bible Text is from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved

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2020 has been anything but 'ordinary'. Yet here we are, with only a few weeks of 'ordinary' left, according to our liturgical calendar, and what could be more 'ordinary' than the subject of taxes? Here it is in our Gospel reading, ready to keep our feet planted firmly on the ground!

Today, we might allow a word in praise of the ordinary.

Some things never change, and, as now, at the time that Jesus is questioned in today's Gospel account, taxes were an inevitably politically divisive subject: a useful tool if you want to trip up a religious teacher.

Bear in mind that, only the chapter before, Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem triumphant, has overturned the tables at the temple and started telling dangerous stories, in which the leaders of faith groups don't come off too well. Having been told even the tax collectors can be worthy of redemption in these stories, while their own integrity is challenged, the Pharisees now approach Jesus on a different tack, setting a trap.

"Okay Jesus, so the tax collectors might be going to heaven ahead of some of us, but what about taxes themselves: should we really be paying them?"

It could not be a more perfect question for their purposes. There's no right answer.

The coins used to pay taxes display a graven image, which could amount to idolatry for the more zealous Jews. But not to pay those taxes would be a sure fire way to exit post-haste out of civic society, to say the least.

Asked in isolation and sincerity, this question might have been an innocent and interesting one for Jesus to engage with. But there's an atmosphere here, an ambience of tension, and the questioners are looking for mistakes. Now, they've found a question guaranteed to ensure Jesus makes a mistake. On a technicality. Either he supports upholding a corrupt government and idolatry, or he supports breaking the law.

The Pharisees want to catch Jesus out legalistically, but Jesus responds morally, and teaches those who listened then and we who read the story now a lesson on perspective: do your duty, obey the law, but remember that you have a higher purpose too, giving to God what is God's.

A recent article asked a question like this: 'what has been forgotten from history because it was too ordinary for anyone to record it?' Whether it be the third vessel in the a condiment set (salt, pepper and...?) or a whole civilisation that the Ancient Egyptians traded with, which no Egyptian scribe thought to note the location of, there are elements of our ordinary history which have simply been too pedestrian for anyone to remember.

At times, the Bible may seem frustratingly lacking in hard and fast rules. But here, from Jesus, we have a clear direction: live as lawful citizens, pay your taxes, even if the empire you pay them to needs challenging. Our Gospel writer recognised this as a moment worth recording, a small and ordinary sort of conversation which should be preserved.

Though Jesus is dismissive of the Pharisees who ask the question, he answers the question, giving comment on the pedestrian, the ordinary, the moments of life which are familiar to all, regardless of faith or religious experience.

It might seem like mundane subject matter, but it reflects back to us why Jesus came: to stroll beside us in the everyday; helping us navigate earthly living; guiding us in what to give to the world and what to give to God.

Jesus instructs the listeners to give to the emperor the coins which bear his image. Those are his.

But what of giving to God what is God's?

Perhaps we could apply the same logic as the coin which belongs to the emperor: let everything bearing the image of God be given to God. So, take a pause, take a walk into the hallway or the downstairs loo and see in the mirror there the image of God. The thing carrying the image of God which is all we asked to give.

Everything we are is all we are asked to give to God. The most ordinary of our moments and character traits, not just the peaks and troughs of the extraordinary moments.

Yes, a word in praise of the ordinary: it's where Jesus came to meet us, and it's what we're called to offer in thanks to God whose image we bear. Amen.⁵

Prayers of intercession

God of mercy and grace, we know that we can come to you each morning to bring our requests and our prayers to lay them before you.

We are astounded at your great mercy, for we know how your standards for our behaviour are so high and yet you are prepared to listen to our prayers.

You are troubled by the wickedness of the world; you do not approve of boasting, telling lies, or deceit of any kind.

You will judge those who cause harm to others and all who do wrong in your sight.

Yet, although we know that there are such times in our own lives, we also know that if we are truly sorry, we can come before you to ask for forgiveness, and that you will look on us with grace and love and mercy and give us the chance to put the wrong behind us and to start again.

Then we ask that you will lead us on in our lives, forgiven and renewed and having learned yet another lesson about our own weaknesses.

God of mercy and grace, we turn from you again to face the work you have given us to do in your world. Amen.⁶

Hymn: 713 STF – Show me how to stand for justice

Blessing

We go from this moment refreshed and renewed,
We go with a fresh encounter with the living God in our hearts,
We go to seek a better world where justice and peace reign, Amen.⁷

⁵ Reflection written by Becki Stennett

⁶ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

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⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker