

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 time of worship. Amen.

Hymn: Now thank we all our God

1 Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

2 Oh, may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever-joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
and keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,

and free us from all ills
in this world and the next.

3 All praise and thanks to God
who reigns in highest heaven --
the Father and the Son
and Spirit -- now be given:
the one, eternal God,
whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Martin Rinkart (1586-1649)
translated Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878) (alt.)
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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

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.

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 churches year. We may not all have pulpit falls and flowers that match the colours of the liturgical seasons as is the case in some Christian traditions, but I'm sure that most of us are familiar with the shape that the liturgical year takes beginning in Advent and progressing through to Lent and Pentecost, as we are moved from moment to moment of the story of Jesus.

Currently, we are travelling through the season that is referred to as '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.

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.

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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.

Prayers of intercession

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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.

Hymn: Son of God, eternal Saviour

1 Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Lord made flesh whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
you, our Head, who, throned in glory,
for your own will ever plead,
fill us with your love and pity;
heal our wrongs, and help our need.

2 As you, Lord, have lived for others,
so may we for others live;
freely have your gifts been granted,
freely may your servants give:
yours the gold and yours the silver,
yours the wealth of land and sea,
we but stewards of your bounty,
held in solemn trust will be.

3 Come, O Christ, and reign among us,
King of love, and Prince of peace;

hush the storm of strife and passion,
bid its cruel discords cease;
by your patient years of toiling,
by your silent hours of pain,
quench our fevered thirst of pleasure,
shame our selfish greed of gain.

4 Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Lord made flesh, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
by your praying, by your willing,
that your people should be one,
grant, O grant our hope's fruition:
here on earth your will be done.

Somerset Corry Lowry (1855-1932)
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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