

## REFLECTION FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

(18.10.2020)

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with reference to Exodus 33: 12-23 & Matthew 22: 15-22

It's been a tough week, hasn't it? With all the talk of increased infection rates, the tightening of restrictions and the realisation that long, dark nights are now drawing in, any sense of optimism that we may have allowed ourselves to feel during the summer months is fast evaporating. In the conversations that I have had this week, I sense that people's spirits are flagging. And that's before we even begin to consider the personal struggles and setbacks that some are currently having to endure. All in – it's tough. And, of course, with tough times come tough questions. And there are plenty of those kicking around at the moment. Is this three-tier lockdown system going to prove effective or will we need another national effort (perhaps a two to three week-long UK-wide circuit-breaker lockdown)? Either way, how do we balance the need to protect people's lives, people's mental health and the economy? And, as working hours are cut and jobs lost, where are those who most need financial support going to find it? Tough questions then and, as ever, it's difficult to see where the answers are going to come from. All of which leaves me wanting to curl up into a ball and hibernate for the winter or, at the very least, pick up a warm hug of a Bible reading to talk about – one that throws the arms of God's love around us and assures us that everything will be alright, that these dark days will pass.

Suffice to say that Matthew's account of Jesus' final week of life and, in particular, the episode in which he superbly handles a tough question designed to catch him out doesn't quite cut it. We can applaud Jesus' speed of thought and the way he not only exposes the hypocrisy of his questioners but also sidesteps the trap set – thus avoiding landing himself in trouble with the Roman authorities or alienating himself from his support base – but this week, really, who cares?

Similarly, we can admire Moses' determination to represent the people before God and to secure for them the promise of God's continued presence with them – something that not long before God had threatened to withdraw – but even this can't offer us much comfort this week when one learns of the backdrop against which the conversation took place. In short, the freed-from-slavery-in-Egypt-but-now-wandering-in-the-wilderness people of Israel had got twitchy whilst Moses was off talking with God on Mount Sinai and, fearing that he wouldn't return, had reverted to old ways and old gods – even making one from melted down gold. It seems that God had been ready to wipe them out until Moses intervened and managed to change God's mind. Yet, even then, Moses arranged for three thousand "guilty" people to be massacred, seemingly believing the making of a golden calf-god to be a greater crime than the murdering of thousands of people. And God seemingly agreed, sending a plague on the idol-makers, and saying nothing of the ensuing killing. Surely, this is the kind of thought process that allows someone to believe a cartoon to be more blasphemous than the brutal killing of someone who has shown such a cartoon to others. That such thinking is here in our scriptures is a reminder that we should always approach them with a critical eye. But, again, not the warm hug of a Bible reading that I was hoping for this week.

The problem, it seems, is that I can't quite locate in these passages the God that I want to find there this week. Absent from them is the God that I've spent years shaping in my mind, the God who mirrors my own beliefs, prejudices and sensibilities. In other words, nowhere to be seen is the God that I have created in my own image.

When, in response to the trick question, Jesus asks to see a coin used for the Roman tax and is brought one, he asks, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' Or, in other translations: 'Whose is this portrait and inscription?' (NIV), 'Whose is this image and superscription?'. When he is told, 'the emperor's' - 'Caesar's' - he famously replies, to borrow from the KJV, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.' Amazed, Jesus' questioners slope off scratching their heads, trying to figure out what just happened; what Jesus had said and, just as importantly, what he might've meant. We could talk for hours trying to make sense of this ourselves.

When I hear the phrase, 'give to God the things that are God's', and ask myself the question, 'What belongs to God?', I am immediately transported in my mind to a Northamptonshire field, to the Greenbelt festival and to a song that has been sung in worship there many times over the years: 'Oh, the earth is the Lord's and all its weary people, oh the earth is the Lord's and everything that breathes.' As I try to work out what Jesus might've meant, it seems likely that I will find the germ of an answer in these words. And actually, giving to God – laying before God – the world and its weary people, is about all I can do at the moment. I think of the powerful words of Dame Laura Casey this week who, with millions more people facing tighter restrictions, expressed her fear that this could mean real destitution for countless families.

Responding to a recent change in Government policy which will result in the Treasury paying two thirds of wages where businesses are forced to close in areas under the strictest limits, Dame Louise warned that this is like the government saying to people, 'You can only afford two thirds of your rent, you can only afford two thirds of your food'. Suggesting that the situation "needs a more cross-government cross-society response" she said, "Do we want to go back to the days where people can't put shoes on the children's feet?" "Are we actually asking people in places like Liverpool to go out and prostitute themselves, so that they could put food on the table?" (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54545158>)

I think of footballer Marcus Rashford MBE, a remarkable young man whose ongoing work to tackle food poverty has already shamed the government into action once this year and who this week has launched a further campaign calling for the expansion and extension of the free school meals programme to enable a further 1.5 million children to receive a nutritious meal each week day, even in school holidays. (<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/554276>)

And I think of the *Reset the Dept* campaign recently launched by a coalition of churches and Christian organisations, including the Methodist Church. Highlighting the fact that an estimated six million people in the UK have been swept into debt as a result of Covid-19 (the biggest increases in debt amongst the poorest households), this calls on the Chancellor to create a Jubilee Fund to provide grants to pay off and cancel unavoidable debt accrued by households during the lockdown period, that they might be given a more stable platform from which to face the future. (<https://resetthedebt.uk>)

*Oh the earth is the Lord's and all its weary people; oh the earth is the Lord's and everything that breathes...*

I know that, like everyone else, I risk creating God in my own image every time I speak like this. I understand that I could be accused of not engaging enough with those passages of scripture that I find problematic or just uninteresting, but I long ago made the decision to spend less time and energy arguing against the God I don't believe in and rather more worshipping and proclaiming the God that I do. Jesus did talk about money and the Bible has plenty to say about it too. There's also enough in scripture to suggest that God has a bias to the poor, the weary, the downtrodden and oppressed and the broken-hearted. It's been tough for us all this week, of course, but it's been exceptionally tough for some. And it will be for some time to come.

The God I believe in, the one I long to encounter in scripture and in the world, is the God who cares equally deeply about, journeys with and throws arms of love around each and every person on this planet - and calls on us all to do the same. So, to side alongside all those other tough questions, my questions for you to ponder this week are: 'What does God that you have created in your image look like?' and 'What does it mean to give to this God the things that are God's?'