

**Debby's sermon 18 October**  
**1 Thessalonians 1.1-10 & Matthew 22.15-22**

Have you noticed how much politics there is around these days? You can't get away from it this year. Back in the day, when I was a child, I was told firmly that in polite conversation you should never talk about politics - or religion. But that was down in Sussex and this is Yorkshire; that was then and these are Covid-19 pandemic days when government is very much hands on. Ah well, thank goodness we don't mention politics here in church.....sorry, I'm afraid we can't avoid it. Desmond Tutu said "**When people say that the Bible and politics don't mix**, I ask them which **Bible** they are reading". And in today's gospel, it's centre stage ....

I would have loved to have been in the temple in those days after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Just after he had evicted all the street traders from his heavenly Father's house of prayer, turning over their tables, but before the passion began. Jesus' final days of teaching - and in today's passage from Matthew - his dealing with Pharisees who try out flattery on him and it gets them nowhere. Their question is "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" The emperor is Tiberius Caesar and the Romans officially regard him as a god. The coin used to pay the tax (on agricultural and business profits) is a denarius. This tax has been paid for nearly a hundred years since the Romans occupied Judaea - but the coin carries the image of Caesar and that breaks the commandment against graven images.

Jesus asks "show me the coin" - and someone has one, right there in the temple - the sacred space to the Lord God. Jerusalem is a city where the two cultures are clashing - Jewish and Roman. Whose side is Jesus on? Then Jesus becomes the questioner - whose head is this and whose title? The Pharisees say - the emperor.

And Jesus replies in a one-liner full of wisdom "Give Caesar the things that are his and God the things that are his". You decide what Caesar deserves - the coinage belongs to him - it has his image on it. But absolutely everything belongs to God! All things come from him and of his own we give him. Above all, what has the image of God stamped on it - a human being. I said 2 weeks ago that because we are made in the image of God we have the character of God imprinted in us. Maybe a stick of rock is a better description than a coin in our case! It's not what people see in us that shows them God but God is written all the way through us. However, learning to live in step with God's character is a life's journey and all of us make many wrong choices as well as right choices in following that beacon of divine light, that core of God's image.

If we move on about ten years from Jesus' meeting with the Pharisees in the Jerusalem temple - to Paul writing to the new Christians in Thessalonika, we find him praising and thanking them for the quality of their Christian life and in this opening there are these lovely lines .....

**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, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.**

Imitators of Christ ..... an example to all the believers. Thessalonika could see Jesus because it could see the Christians. A later great imitator of Jesus Christ, St Francis of Assisi, knew it was lives not words that mattered most. He said "Preach the gospel at all times - use words if necessary". Have you ever heard the saying "Christianity is caught not taught" ?

I wonder if your experience is like mine - that my faith grew in leaps and bounds when I was part of a Christian youth group lead by a curate and his wife who were wonderfully warm and

welcoming. And I can think of individuals I have known who had been praying for so long that it shows. People who preached the gospel at all times and used words when necessary.

Do you remember those words of St Paul that became a sermon series last year? “The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. Fruit only grows on an established tree. Spiritual fruit grows in an established Christian life, when we spend dedicated prayer time with God. And it can’t be forced .....it can’t be hurried .... because these lovely characteristics are all the characteristics of God and they are grace-gifts. He of his generosity dwells in us and these are the signals that God is present. And we will be the last people to notice it.

Think back to last week when we shared a very plain and simple Harvest service because of Covid. But Harvest is all about gratitude for God’s generosity and that grace spilled over into Julie’s sermon about being generous . . . and into the shoe boxes for needy children and families that Caroline was talking about .... And into the response to Pam’s description of the destitute asylum seekers on Lesbos whose camp had been burnt to the ground..... And of course into the gifts for the Welcome Centre, whose work feeding needy local people is even more necessary in Covid days. God the source of generosity was present last Sunday at Newsome. And the gospel was preached in action - Jesus’ words “ I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you visited me”.

But there’s another sign of God’s abiding presence in us ... and among us. I often think about Jesus’ words “abide in me and I abide in you’. Make your home - your abode - in me .... And I will make my home in you. Home will be where you are - where we are together. I think this is right at the core of our relationships. “Love one another as I have loved in you. Abide in my love”. I believe that there is a deep kind of friendship that develops among Christians who worship together. I think that since the first lockdown there has been a deepening quality of fellowship among Emmanuel people. All of us - those who read the words at home, those who meet online, those who worship in church. Whether we have thought about it or not, this is an aspect of the imitation of Christ. And when it spills over into the local community, and when it produces the NHS and the care sector, it is because our faith feeds into government. And if eventually, it legislates for everyone, even in the left-behind communities and the asylum seekers and refugees and homeless people, to live with dignity and thrive, it would be the best witness of all.

So Heavenly Father, form us in the likeness of Christ so that our lives may glorify you. Amen.