

Sermon  
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost  
October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: EXODUS 33:12-23; PSALM 99; 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10; MATTHEW 22:15-22

We are where we are.

On Friday, and again yesterday, Diana, Kate and I were at our Diocesan Synod. Our guest speaker was The Very Reverend Canon Richard Sewell, who is Dean of St. George's College in Jerusalem, and a Residentiary Canon of St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem. Dean Richard and his wife JulieAnn shared with us their firsthand experience of the conflict and violence in the Land of the Holy One. They offered of themselves with tremendous vulnerability, and hearing from them brought both blessing and heartbreak.

We are where we are. Dean Richard offered us these words as he spoke of the complexity of the situation in Israel and Palestine. He spoke of the importance of reflecting on where we have been in order to chart wise steps forward. This certainly applies in the context of what is happening in the Land of the Holy One, and it applies in the context of our Christian faith, too. We are where we are. Sam Wells speaks of it this way: through Jesus we are reconciled: the past is taken care of. So too is the future taken care of: we are drawn into God's love through Jesus's death and resurrection. This frees us, as Christians to live fully – meaningfully, intentionally – in the present. It frees us to recognize that we are where we are and to commit to working with God and the movement of the Spirit where we are...

This morning our Gospel reading brings us Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple. As Matthew tells it, this story takes place on the equivalent of Monday of the original Holy Week (the day after Palm Sunday), and Jesus, the disciples and the crowds following him have now been occupying the Temple for the better part of two days. The authorities have already attempted to lure Jesus into blasphemy, and now some religious leaders come back for a second try, this time bringing some

Herodians with them. Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas (King Herod's son), Rome's "puppet" leader and collaborator with the Empire. Pharisees were against the Roman occupation, so they had little in common with Herodians — except their mutual opposition to Jesus and the trouble he was stirring up among the people.

These religious leaders try to entrap Jesus with their question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?" They expect an all-or-nothing response from Jesus. That's not what Jesus gives them, though. He asks to see a coin and they produce a denarius, the usual daily wage. Jesus knows that everyday life is hard, and that the sustenance of life is crucial to ordinary people. This coin represents their hard work. They are part of the local economy no matter how complex or abusive it may be. Recognizing the Roman Empire's economy and politics, Jesus asks: "Whose head is this and whose title?" (Matthew 22:20). The Pharisees answered, "Caesar's," which is a correct answer. Then, Jesus said to them: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's: this isn't an all-or-nothing answer. This answer isn't about categories. It asks us to see that God is more than this.

It is Caesar's image on the coin. God's image extends far beyond this. God's image is in everyone we meet. So, to give to God the things that are God's is to acknowledge that try as we might, we cannot keep God in the categories we might want to. God is more than temporal unilateral power. More than our church or our government. Caesar's power is limited and it's part of God's larger world. God is more than we can ask or imagine...

Barbara Brown Taylor says this in her book "An Altar in the World":

"Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars."

Jesus's answer sidesteps the Pharisees question, but it also rings true, and in a way, Jesus is saying "We are where we are". He is saying "we are where we are", and where we are – this earthly life, whether it be in first century Jerusalem or present day Canada – where we are isn't all-or-nothing. We are called to careful and consistent analysis of the realities of this life and our relationship with God. Our lives – where we are – and our relationship with God – what we believe, as Christians, what we know of the way of Jesus – these intersect, and we are invited to act out of these intersections. We are invited to join in with God already at work at these intersections.

One of the things that we did at Synod on Friday was to approve an Action Plan for Contextual Mission & New Worshipping Communities for our Diocese.

What is contextual mission? Contextual mission is the response we are invited to give to the question "how is God calling us to proclaim the good news in our time and place?" Contextual mission means learning how to share the love of God in ways that are aware of the cultures and situations of people in the wider community. Contextual mission asks us to see how our relationship with God and the realities of this world, this life, intersect. The Action Plan for Contextual Mission and New Worshipping Communities was launched at Synod yesterday morning with a Diocesan-wide initiative called "Listening for Divine Sparks: A Time of Prayer". Clergy and Diocesan Synod representatives acknowledged the importance of prayer, the importance of careful discernment and intentional searching for the sparks of God already at work in our world. We prayed together, facing the four directions and naming each parish in our Diocese, praying for wisdom in discerning divine sparks in our midst. Each parish will join in that prayer and discernment starting in November. I look forward to sharing in that with you all. I see and feel those divine sparks here at Ascension already – all the time! – and I look forward to discovering more of them together!

God cannot be contained by human words and systems. We're also reminded in this in our reading from Exodus this morning. Moses's encounter with God reminds us that we cannot hold onto images of God. We can name God, visualize God, taste and see God, and yet none of these can fully encompass God. God is always more than we can ask or imagine.

Jesus invites us into conscientious engagement with the world. The goal of this life is not to defeat the empire or adopt an all-or-nothing policy. It's not to keep God in a box. Not to maintain nice, neat categories. The goal of this life is to recognize that – as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it: "...the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Dean Richard Sewell spoke of the worldwide Anglican communion as a potent reminder that God is everywhere. Our liturgy, our common prayer remind us of the connections that are everywhere, extending from one side of the world to the other. As we pray for peace in the Land of the Holy One, we are acknowledging these connections.

Jesus invites us to choose connection. To choose to recognize God's image, God's light, and God's love in the faces of all of humanity. To choose love, and to seek ways to embody and enact this love anywhere and everywhere, starting where we are. May it be so. In Jesus name. Amen.