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Psalm 96: 1-9,10-13; 1 Thess 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22 Wesley UC

Prayer: Holy God, you have made us in your image, and we belong to you alone. So we offer ourselves to you, in service, love and praise. May my words today affirm this truth and convey the good news of the Gospel, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A few weeks ago the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church met in session in Sydney. In former times, meetings such as this would have gained significant publicity in the wider print media. Not anymore. At the Synod opening service, I think the newly installed Moderator got it right when he spoke of the “church becoming relegated to the sidelines and to the margins of a community being increasingly fractured”.

The Moderator then asked “Are we guardians of the past watching the world go by or are we witnesses of now, of a God who is with us now?”

In his own unique way, Simon was pointing to mission and witness as vital components of the Christian faith. Now I would add that this is not simply pointing us toward some heroic activity on the church’s part. I much prefer the attitude of the theologian Karl Barth, who wrote that the mission is the activity of God. Rather than picturing the role of the church as conquering, converting or arguing with the heathen, Barth depicts the church as standing in solidarity with non-Christians and pointing to the work of God.

I think this comes across in today’s reading from Psalm 96.

It has a simple message. All people are summoned to worship God as a response to the mission of God to the world as creator and reconciler. The Psalm emphasizes the **solidarity of all of humanity before God**. It calls into question every notion of hierarchy that demotes people to the periphery of worship and witness. In v7 the families of the peoples are called to ascribe glory to the Lord **together**.

Further, the Psalm invites a form of witness that is portrayed as a **playful celebration of life**. The images of fields exulting and forests shouting for joy display the greatness of the Lord. The sea in v3 is a marvellous work of God, and simply by being its roaring self, witnesses to God’s glory. I think in a similar way, **humans witness to the marvellous works of the creator God by being themselves**.

And then again, the Psalm in v10 invokes the promise of God to **judge the peoples with equity**. For Christians, this promise is fulfilled in Christ. In Christ we find our true solidarity because we are no longer defined by our differences but by our commonality as children of God. So we witness to this reconciled state of affairs by reminding the church and the world that we are called to **practice equity and justice** that reflect God’s righteous judgement.

The question for us then is, “**How do we witness to the mission of God in ways that embrace far more than words of assent?**” What are the practical issues that confront us as we take our witness seriously? Let me give an example as to how this question challenges me in a unique way every week.

A few months ago, I accepted the position of interim Chaplain at the NSW Police Academy in Goulburn. The position had fallen vacant, and I was asked to visit the Academy one and sometimes 2 days per week as the interim Chaplain. I was told that it may be some months before a new full time Chaplain is appointed so I have now settled in for the long haul. So here I am, in my mid-70s, heading to Goulburn at an early hour on Monday mornings, to engage with 450 students of Policing and 150 staff. It's quite a challenge! How to relate to a vast number of young adults in ways that bear witness to the mission of God in their midst?

Well, reflecting on the words of Psalm 96, this is what I am inspired to offer in ministry.

Firstly, I try to identify with the Academy community as a fellow traveller in life, without pretence or status, but as someone on everyone's level. And this is unusual a hierarchical organisation, where rank means a lot! As a Chaplain, I don't really claim a rank, but assure the students and staff that when I am in conversation with them I am relate to them as an equal. And this is always liberating. It offers a freedom to engage openly and honestly. I have no desire or need to point to myself, but am conscious of simply pointing to the work and mission of God often covertly, but sometimes overtly.

A second priority is to encourage the students to share their life experiences, both positive and painful. I hear accounts of different life situations, family histories and connections and then, as our conversation deepens, I will invariably be asked about my own background as well. When I hear the students' stories I find myself trying to identify something in their past, no matter how mundane, which can enrich their future in policing. [Careers in the trades, retail, IT, teaching, nursing] I identify my role as much more than a pastoral helper in times of trouble. I rather see myself as helping to interpret the meaning of the whole of life in the context of grace, with an eye to participation in the mission of God for each and every human person.

And then thirdly, in my relationship with the whole Academy community, I am alert to the issues of equity and justice which provoke me to be an advocate for that which is an expression of my Christian witness. It's not heroic stuff. But it is simply being aware of my calling and readiness to witness to God's mission in a setting where it is so often ignored.

Now each of us lives in unique personal environments. But it seems to me as we engage with the words of Psalm 96 we are summoned to respond by living out our witness to the mission of God in solidarity with all people. We can point beyond ourselves and, in the words of the Psalm, sing a new song to the glory of God.

The mission of God knows no bounds. And as we now move to focus on the Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 22, this point is clearly evident.

The passage begins with a sinister reference to the Pharisee's plan to entrap Jesus. They are stirred up. A few days previously Jesus entered Jerusalem in a manner that intensified his conflict with the Jewish religious leaders. Shortly after that he cleansed the Temple, driving out buyers and sellers, and overturning the tables of the money changers. Again the Jewish leaders were challenged by Jesus' actions. And then, after telling parables highlighting the rejection of God's mission by Israel's leaders, we come to the confrontation featured in today's Gospel reading.

It begins with flattery. “Tell us Jesus, since you’re so smart and always have an honest answer for any question that is asked of you – is it proper for those who follow you to pay taxes to the emperor, to Caesar, or not?”

The questioners were unlikely allies. Some were Herodians, members of a party within Judaism that kept power by forging alliances with the occupying Roman Government. They believed that compromise was the only way for people of faith to survive in Israel under Roman rule, so they advocated paying the poll or head tax as a way of appeasing the Roman overlords.

On the opposite side of this debate stood the Pharisees, a group of religious leaders who rigorously held to the teaching of the law of Moses and the prophets, and believed that compromising with a political power like Rome was totally against their Jewish faith.

They come from opposite ends of the tax debate, and yet these groups join forces, hoping to trap Jesus with their no-win question. If Jesus responded in favour of the Herodians, agreeing that taxes should be paid to Caesar, he would be seen by the Pharisees and many Jews as turning away from Mosaic law to the oppressive government. But if he sided with the Pharisees and agreed that taxes should not be paid to the Roman overlords, he could be accused of treason. Either way, he stood to lose.

Jesus’ response is classic. He ignores the constraints of the original question and asks a question of his own!

“Give me a coin” he says. “Tell me, whose image is on it?” “Why, it’s the image of the emperor” both sets of questioners respond. “Exactly” says Jesus – revealing that they were already involved with Caesar whether they like it or not – by simply carrying his coinage in their pockets, and in the Temple precincts! “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God’s.”

We are told that his hearers were amazed, and went away.

When we try to see what was behind Jesus words what should be clear is that Jesus believed that all things, and everything, belonged to God. All things were derived from God, including political power.

In fact, when we peruse the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, politics and religion are always intermingled. In the Old Testament we read of the ways in which God ascribed political power even to foreign rulers and enemies! **[Today’s reading from Isaiah is a case in point, noting that God anointed Cyrus, the Persian King, to set Israel free and bring them home.]** Then in the New Testament we read of Jesus constantly challenging the political powers and social structures of his day.

On the face of it, this passage is not to be interpreted to mean that politics and religion don’t mix. Even so, this kind of interpretation became prominent following the time of the Reformation.

In a few weeks there will be celebrations marking the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation set in train by Martin Luther. Now it was Luther who argued for a distinct line to be drawn between the spiritual and political realms. The assumption was that the state and church would respect each other’s sphere of influence and both would co-exist in peace!

Many of us will remember Joh Bjelke Peterson, one time long serving Premier of Queensland. Joh was a pious Lutheran, and was happy to declare it. But he couldn't cope with what he believed was the intrusion of church leaders into his territory. He was quite sure that the church had no right at all to comment on political issues, seriously believing that this was his domain. "Stay in your churches" he would say – "pray, read the Bible, sing hymns all you like" but just leave me to run the state.

On a much more serious note, in the setting of Nazi Germany, many Lutherans justified keeping their vows to the state by using such texts as today's to endorse their approval of Hitler's position despite the sheer evil of his actions. It was left to the courageous witness of the Confessing Church to call Hitler's leadership for what it was – an offence against God and humanity.

Jesus' teaching goes beyond the original question that was asked of him. He simply said that what is God's must be given to God. It was not an in principle division of the world into 2 realms with 2 sovereigns. The kingdom of God represented by Jesus **embraced all of life** and Matthew is clear that loyalty to God is a different and higher category than loyalty to Caesar. So, what does it mean for the way we live our daily lives?

The theologian David Lose makes the following comment:

"Whatever alliances we may make with the powers of this world, or with those who oppose them - these alliances are always temporary, and ultimately directed by our relationship with the One who created us and whose image we bear. This means that following Jesus' counsel is always matter of **discernment and confession**, as we will frequently fail and always struggle to discern what God-fearing participation with government requires."

In the end for Jesus, the powers that be decided that even if they couldn't trap him, he was too dangerous to allow to live. It would seem that death was inevitable. And yet, as the Gospels declared, death was not the final verdict.

Sometimes the Uniting Church makes decisions and advocates in the community for particular issues. And at times like this we may agree, or not agree, and we may even get the idea that the church is taking sides in politics. But that is not the ultimate question. The real issue is how people of faith are seeking to discern and witness to God's mission in the context of our lives here and now.

We are called by Jesus live out our Christian lives in every aspect of our being. For what are the things that are God's that we give back to God? The answer is "Ourselves".

And may this be done in the spirit of giving glory to God, to whom be all praise for ever and ever, Amen.