

Sermon and Readings 21st Sunday After Pentecost 18th October 2026

Exodus 33.12–23

¹² Moses said to the Lord, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." ¹³ Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' ¹⁴ He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' ¹⁵ And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.' ¹⁷ The Lord said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.' ¹⁸ Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' ¹⁹ And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' ²¹ And the Lord continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'

Psalm 99

¹ The Lord is king, let the nations tremble:
he is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake.
² The Lord is great in Zion:
he is high above all nations.
³ Let them praise your great and terrible name:
for holy is the Lord.
⁴ The Mighty One is king and loves justice:
you have established equity,
you have dealt righteousness and justice in Jacob.
⁵ O exalt the Lord our God:
and bow down before his footstool, for he is holy.

⁶ Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among those who call upon his name:

they called to the Lord and he answered.

⁷ He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud:

they kept to his teachings and the law that he gave them.

⁸ You answered them, O Lord our God:

you were a forgiving God to them and pardoned their wrongdoing.

⁹ O exalt the Lord our God:

and bow down towards his holy hill, for the Lord our God is holy.

1 Thessalonians 1.1–10

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And 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, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Matthew 22.15–33

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 emperors, and to God the things that are God's.' ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. ²³ The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, ²⁴ 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother."' ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. ²⁶ The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ Last of all, the woman herself died. ²⁸ In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.' ²⁹ Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ³² "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

Sermon

In our modern world whose image are you reflecting? Have you ever stopped to think about how much of our lives is spent trying to keep everyone happy? We try and keep our families, friends, bosses and the folk at church happy. And then, of course, there's social media. Now some of you older folk may say "oh I have nothing to do with social media (Facebook etc)", however I've been around many of you whom I know have a social media account!

We live in a world where people carefully choose which photos to post, what opinions to share, and how they want others to see them. We worry about our image. Are we successful enough? Popular enough? Doing enough? Are we keeping up with everyone else? But today's Gospel challenges us with a very different question. Instead of asking, "What image am I presenting to the world?" perhaps we should ask, "Whose image am I reflecting?" And that's where Jesus takes us today.

In Matthew's Gospel, the religious leaders are trying to catch Jesus out. They ask him a politically loaded question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Now, if you think arguments about taxes and politics are something new, think again! Two thousand years ago, people were just as passionate about government, money, and who should be in charge. In fact, long before Jesus was around.

The religious leaders think they've found the perfect trap. If Jesus says they should pay taxes, he'll upset those who hate Roman rule. If he says they shouldn't, he could be accused of supporting rebellion. It's the sort of question we might see on social media today, where someone asks a question not because they want an answer, but because they want to start an argument (Do you know that it is estimated that 1 in 5 Social media accounts are fake...set up to purposely create arguments).

Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead, he asks for a coin. "Whose image is on it?" he asks. "Caesar's," they reply. And Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." It's a skilful answer, but there's something much deeper happening here. Jesus is reminding them, and us, that while the coin bears Caesar's image, we bear the image of God. Think about that for a moment. We belong to God. Not because we are perfect. Not because we attend church every Sunday. Not because we have everything worked out. But because God created us, loves us, and calls us his own.

Here's a question worth considering. We give our time to our jobs, families, hobbies, responsibilities, and all the other demands of life. But what do we give to God? Sometimes God gets whatever is left over. We might spend hours scrolling through our phones, watching television, or worrying about things we cannot change, but struggle to find ten minutes for prayer. And I suspect most of us, me included, have been guilty of that at times. We say God is important, but does the way we spend our time reflect that? Jesus isn't asking us to abandon our responsibilities. He's asking us to recognise who we ultimately belong to. And when we get that relationship right, it changes how we approach everything else.

Our Exodus reading gives us another wonderful picture of this. Moses has been leading the Israelites through the wilderness, and quite frankly, he's had a difficult time of it. The people complain about the food, the water, about the journey. They even complain about Moses!

Anyone who's ever been responsible for leading a group of people might understand a little of how Moses felt (I know I have). Yet Moses knows something important. He cannot do what God has called him to do in his own strength. He says to God, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here." In other words, "God, I'm not going anywhere without you!"

Imagine if that became our attitude each morning. Before checking our messages, reading the news, or worrying about everything we need to accomplish, we simply prayed: "Lord, whatever today brings, I don't want to face it without you." We might still have difficult conversations, face disappointment, frustration, or uncertainty. But we wouldn't face those things alone.

Moses understood that God's presence was more important than having an easy journey. And perhaps that's something our busy, modern world desperately needs to rediscover. We have more technology, information, and more ways of connecting than any generation before us. Yet many people still feel anxious, isolated, and overwhelmed. We can be connected to hundreds of people online and still feel terribly alone. What we need isn't simply another connection. We need the assurance that God is with us.

In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he thanks God for three things: Their work of faith, their labour of love, and their steadfastness of hope. I love that description because Paul isn't congratulating them on how impressive their church services are or how many activities, they have organised. He's thanking God because their faith is making a difference.

People can see it. And that raises an important question for us as a church. If our church disappeared tomorrow, would the wider community notice? I personally think folk would... Not just because the building was closed, but because something important was missing.

Would people miss our kindness, our welcome, our practical support, our prayers, and the love? Would those who are lonely, struggling financially, or experiencing homelessness notice that something had changed? Would people say, "Those Christians from St Albans' and St Augustine's really cared about us"?

That's what Paul is celebrating in the Thessalonian church. Their faith wasn't locked away inside a building. It was visible in the way they lived. And that is what God calls us to be. Sometimes reflecting God's image is as simple as sitting with someone who is grieving, listening without judging, helping someone who's

struggling, or making a newcomer feel welcome. Small acts of love can have an enormous impact. And sometimes those small acts become the very way someone experiences God's presence.

Then we come to the second part of our Gospel reading. The Sadducees, who don't believe in the resurrection, come to Jesus with another question designed to make him look foolish. They tell a complicated story about a woman who marries seven brothers, one after another, as each die. Then they ask, "In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" It's an absurd scenario, deliberately designed to ridicule belief in life after death. But Jesus reminds them that they are thinking about eternal life entirely in earthly terms. God's future is far greater than the limits of our imagination. And then Jesus says something extraordinary: "He is God not of the dead, but of the living." What a wonderful promise.

In a world where we regularly hear about war, violence, illness, suffering, and death, Jesus reminds us that death does not have the final word. God does. Our Christian hope is not simply that life might somehow continue. Our hope is in the living God, whose love and faithfulness reach beyond death. That is the hope that sustains us when we grieve, when life becomes uncertain, and when we face circumstances, we cannot control.

Let me return to where we began. Today, people spend enormous amounts of time managing their image. We can edit our photographs, carefully choose our words, and present the version of ourselves we want others to see. But God isn't interested in our carefully edited image. God knows us as we really are. Our strengths, weaknesses, doubts, failures, and our hopes. And God loves us anyway.

The questions are whether we are allowing that love to shape the way we live. When someone is difficult, do we respond with patience or anger? When someone has different opinions, do we listen or immediately judge? When we see someone in need, do we turn away or offer help? When life becomes difficult, do we remember, like Moses, that God's presence goes with us? And when the future seems uncertain, do we hold on to the hope of the resurrection?

These are the everyday moments when our faith becomes real. We may never preach a sermon, lead a Bible study, or stand at the front of a church. But every

one of us preaches a message through the way we live. Our words, attitudes, generosity, and treatment of others all say something about the God we claim to follow. And perhaps that's the greatest challenge in today's readings. The world doesn't just need more people talking about God's love. It needs more people demonstrating it. So, this week, as we go about our ordinary lives, perhaps we could ask ourselves one simple question: "When people encounter me, do they see something of Jesus?"

Not perfection, or someone who always gets everything right. But someone who is trying to live with faith, love, grace, and hope. Because the coin may have carried Caesar's image, but you and I carry something far more precious. We carry the image of the living God. And the greatest gift we can give to God is not simply our money, time, or our Sunday mornings. It is our whole lives. Amen.