

20th Sunday in Pentecost 2020

Readings - Exodus 33:12-23, Psalm 99, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22

Introduction - The world is full of images, advertising and largely false marketing. Most of what we see online is simply not a reflection of reality. It is an image presented to us. So what about God? What is the true image of God? We have heard it said; 'God is Love'. While goodness and love are often related, they can actually be very different from one another. Many people who love their country, mankind, the planet, or even God - have not always been good people. However, one of the characteristics of God is that He is also Good!

Common Theme - Imitatio Dei, the imitation of God! Love can, and should, mean a loving action, however it is too often considered to simply be an emotion. Something that you 'fall into' and consequently 'fall out of'. Conversely the term goodness always implies action. God is good and His followers should reflect His character in their goodness too.

Hebraic Perspective - God says in Leviticus six times that we are to be holy because He is holy. We are to imitate God and not try to impersonate Him. We cannot and should not aspire to be gods. Rather the purpose, as part of our worship and delight in God, is to be like God in our actions and characteristics. For example Man is to rest on the Sabbath just as God did at creation. Man is to imitate God in feeding the hungry and giving water to the thirsty, for those are Gods actions in the desert with the people of Israel. There are many ways to worship God, such as in song, in dance, in prayer. In the end though, the greatest of ways to worship the Lord is to be like Him.

Reading #1; Exodus 33:12-23 - Moses wanted to see God's glory, instead God chose to show him His goodness. That God chooses to define Himself as good, is one of the most understated and important statements in the entire Bible. God does not say I will make my love pass before you, in fact the expression 'God is love' is not found in the Hebrew Bible, but rather at the end of the New Testament in 1 John. Because goodness is an action then the implication is that a good God will do good things.

Reading #2; Psalm 99 - This is a powerful Psalm on the kingship of God. God is a king and He reigns over Zion and the nations. It also presents God as Holy (Verse 3&5), and that He is present in the community (Verse 6&7). His goodness is revealed in that the mighty King also loves justice and He has done what is right and just. God's goodness is therefore seen through His deeds. God is also noted as being a forgiving God. The conclusion of the Psalmist for the people who have seen the just, righteous, good and holy deeds of the Lord is exaltation and worship. We worship God because we have seen His might deeds.

Reading #3; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 - Paul had a special connection to the Church in Thessaloniki after he personally founded the community in Acts 17:1-9. Interestingly in Verse 9 Paul reflects on their 'turning away from idolatry' which is a particularly Jewish way of describing conversion. In Verse 6 Paul describes how the Thessalonians became imitators of us and of the Lord. Part of our witness to others is how we imitate the Lord. Paul reiterates this

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concept in his other epistles too. 'Brothers, join together in following my example ..'
Philippians 3:17 and 'Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ' 1Corinthians 11:1.

Reading #4; Matthew 22:15-22 - Jesus' answer to the Pharisees begs the question what really are the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's. This encounter broaches the tension between worldly authority and the authority of Heaven. Jesus expertly handles the tension through the discussion of images. Coinage maintained the economy and the held society in a sense of balance and order. Images on those coins would also capture a sense of authority and obedience to that authority that provided the order and balance. Ultimately we have to be obedient to God but that obedience to God does not mean we should aspire to rebellion against temporal authority. Jesus was also shrewdly saying His movement was not instigating rebellion against Rome. But that God was still King and above Rome.

Hebraic Context - This encounter with Pharisees and Herodians has several levels of intricacy. Images are forbidden in keeping with the 3rd Commandment "Thou shalt not make a graven image", yet this coin bears an image of Caesar. Coins commonly had both images and inscriptions on them, as they still do today! Coins at this time period with Caesar's image, would literally claim that Tiberius Caesar was divine in the inscription. Jesus is asked a question on both the image and the inscription. The coin is both religiously and politically offensive as it also represents occupation and rule from a pagan king claiming to be a god. Apparently Jesus and His disciples are not in the habit of carrying a coin like this. There were other coins in circulation without Caesar on them. What then are the Pharisees and Herodians doing with coins like this? Perhaps Jesus was also embarrassing them for possessing such coins.

ACNA Addendum

Malachi 3:6-12 - The Malachi reading focuses the idea of tithing to God as the notion behind render to the Lord the things that are the Lord's. In this case we render not just our hearts to the Lord in devotion, but also material possessions that we have graciously received from Him. Malachi asks the rhetorical question, can a man rob from God? While it seems crazy that a human could possibly steal from the Lord, God says that withholding tithes and offerings is the equivalent to robbery. The sin has many levels, such as daring to even do such a thing, being shamefully ungrateful for all that God has given you, and it is self destructive in that the deed of withholding from God will not go unpunished. While tithing is indeed not mentioned in the New Testament as a command it is spoken of positively in Luke 11:42. This passage in Malachi also introduces the only time God asks us to put Him to the test. That is, in rendering to the Lord's the things that are the Lord's will result in blessing. As the Lord says in verse 10, 'an overflowing blessing'.

Psalm 96 - God delights to receive adoration, rejoicing and praise as depicted in the Psalm as the *new song*. Our worship and devotion constitute one aspect of 'render to the Lord things of the Lord'. As verse 8 says, ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name. All the earth sings to

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God in the praise that is due Him, that includes the Gentiles. Implying that God is not just some local deity of Israel but rather the King of the Universe. Salvation in the psalms is always universal.