

**2023-10-22 ... 10am Worship Service Sermon ... Revd Jane Stephenson**

**Exodus 33: 12-end; Thessalonians 1: 1-10; Matthew 22: 15-22**

A former First Lady of the U.S.A., Eleanor Roosevelt (whom you might like to know included stopovers in S. Cheshire and N. Shropshire in her 1942 Wartime tour of Great Britain) was appointed as one of the U.S. delegates to the newly formed United Nations in December 1945. She was influential in promoting the peacekeeping purpose of that organisation and helped to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to form the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN, which is currently working in the Middle East to bring food and other aid into Gaza. Eleanor Roosevelt was a committed Christian, raised as an American Episcopalian and her faith was very important in her choice of causes to support. She always said that whatever religious belief a person holds, it should move them to live better in this world and to give them serenity and hope for the future. Having lived through two World Wars and seen the terrible cost in human lives of conflict between nations, she was a great proponent of peace. In a speech in 1946 she asked this question of world leaders: ***“When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?”*** Such a question is a poignant reminder of the current troubles in the Holy Land, but the troubles themselves have deep roots and the peace and compassion she argued for are kept at bay by the experiences of injustice and hatred felt for a long time on both sides: Israel and Palestine.

We must never forget the appalling nature of the Holocaust which took 6 million Jewish lives from this world without any justice or compassion: an event driven by pure hatred and evil. It lies at the root of Israel’s determination to guard its own boundaries and maintain its own security and its tendency to suppress both violent and non-violent opposition to its political policies. Israel cannot perhaps be blamed for seeking to protect its own borders. However, one of the consequences of Jewish suffering in the past and of Israel’s insecurity in recent decades is the confinement of many non-Jewish people to the Palestinian enclaves of The West Bank and The Gaza Strip. Iron-fisted control by Israel in regard to those territories offers no end to the suffering of their people and no hope of change. It invites the growth of extremist groups in Palestine, such as Hamas, but it also offers no outlet to more moderate voices on both sides of the border. Ordinary people, civilians, bear the brunt of the conflict between two nations (if Palestine is even given the dignity of being recognised as a nation). It is no wonder that tensions explode.

There is no excuse for the execution and mass murder of so many ordinary Israeli citizens, many of them women and children in their own land two weeks ago. It was an appalling act, but it was the ordinary citizens who suffered and perhaps the politics which helped to create this evil perpetrated by Hamas. There is also no excuse for the killing of many innocent Palestinian civilians in bombing raids since then, again so many of the victims being women and children. There is little sense here of preventing human misery by not avenging it. There is little sense of compassion on either side of the border.

We know that Israel was “chosen” by God, so that the people and the land were his own, but the journey to that land has been fraught with difficulty and remains so today. In the **Book of Exodus** we read of Moses’ encounters with God on the journey from Egypt and of his constant intercession for the people in his care. We hear of God’s justifiable anger after the episode of the building of the Golden Calf and how Moses intercedes for his **PTO**

people to save their lives. Now he does so again when God declares that Moses can continue to lead them, but God himself will be absent from the journey. Moses as mediator points out that if God abandons them, God's own promise to lead them to a Promised Land is broken. God relents, but Moses also asks for confirmation that he is still the one chosen to lead the exodus. So Moses meets God again, but does not see his face, although Moses himself is transfigured by the encounter and beams with light from God as he carries for a second time the Commandments of God's Law to the Jewish People. There is real power at work in the telling of this story. In God's terms justice or justification would be served by removing his presence from their journey and delegating to Moses alone. God's justice is matched by compassion however means that despite their treachery, God will continue to accompany them and to affirm Moses' leadership.

Compassion becomes the watchword of the human relationship with God and our understanding of who we each are and thus of what it means to have faith. When, in Exodus, God agrees to travel with his people, he is not simply an external guide, but a presence within the hearts and minds of each person. We too need to find that compassionate companion within our own hearts and minds to help us know which direction to travel. Once we are aware of his presence we should travel only with him, but our human instinct remains forceful enough to keep turning us onto our own paths: travelling by our own laws and desires and not by the rule of God' compassion. We know from accounts in the Old Testament that long after the journey to the Promised Land, Israel drifted in and out of the journey with God and that there were times of great faithfulness, but also times of faithless rejection.

The coming of Jesus Christ restored the direction of travel and carried with it a New Covenant, not written in stone, but in Christ himself. In that covenant Christ interceded for us and is our new union with God and that union is offered to all people: Jew and Gentile. St Paul makes it clear in his **letter to the Thessalonians** that he and other apostles carry the Word of God through Christ to bring new hope, a new set of laws to the whole world and that once the Word is received then all who hear it similarly become messengers of that new truth. Paul's praise for the early Christian community founded in Thessalonica is for their steadfastness and for their joy in receiving the Holy Spirit that encourages them to share their changed lives beyond the confines of their own geographical area as well as the confines of their own political authorities. They enable God's message of compassionate justice received in Christ to be carried into the wider world.

..... And thus we come to the showing of a coin in Mathew's Gospel. Two groups of people come to speak with Jesus: on the face of it they are polite and address him respectfully as "Teacher." Underlying this however is not a desire to discover the way of God, but to trick Jesus into compromising his own position. It is much more about politics than religious truth. The Pharisees send their students of The Religious Law to question him, but the aim is not to seek truth, but to ensnare him and to protect and strengthen the power base of the Religious Authorities. Politics masquerades as religion. Similarly, the Herodians who accompany them wish to undermine Jesus. They are allied to the Puppet Ruler approved and appointed by the Roman Governor and are more obviously political. Both groups see Jesus as a danger to their own status and continuing power. Hence the question asked is actually malicious: ***"to whom should you pay your taxes.... Is it lawful to pay them to the Emperor?"*** If Jesus says "yes" then many followers who welcome his radical ministry and (next page)

resent the rule of Rome believing it will fall, may turn away from Jesus. **If he says “no”** then he commits treason against the occupying power. Knowing also that for some even touching a Roman coin by a religious leader is condemned as unclean (even though hypocritically the wealthy among the Priests and Pharisees undoubtedly used that coinage themselves) Jesus simply asks them to show him a coin. He asks whose head is on the coin and therefore who does it belong to? The Emperor is the answer they give. Jesus response to this is: well then, ***“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”*** In those few words he removes the threat and confounds the tricksters. They leave, but there is a deeper point to find here. Jesus is not saying that Caesar and God are equals, that the world is divided between them. He has shown the people the face of Caesar, but we should be reminded that God’s image is in the face of everyone we meet, we are cast in his image and his image should lie within each of us. The Emperor’s face is just as much in the image of God as the face of a beggar, but the Emperor fails to acknowledge this because he fails to act in accordance with God’s rule. It is not with God’s justice and compassion that Caesar or the Jewish Authorities are ruling. In a practical sense of course we can all use money, but we need to use it generously; we can be politicians as long as we serve our communities not ourselves. If we accept that we are made in God’s image, then all our actions and transactions need to be guided by Christ: justice administered with compassion and love are the key to how we should lead our lives.

Walter Brueggemann suggests: **“When the divine image in us all is denied some persons are made by political circumstances to be less than human, some lives become more important than others.”** Compassion must override a desire for vengeful justice. Love must overcome hate. It is all the people of Israel and Palestine who must be seen in God’s image. If we believe we are all made in God’s image then God’s compassionate justice will prevail. Our consciences may grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than to avenge it.

Amen.