

Welcome

Good morning, and welcome to this weeks online service live from Christchurch. For anyone who doesn't know me, my name is Andy Searle, a member at Christchurch and a local preacher in the circuit. You will have seen me many times as this is the eighth time I have taken part in the streamed services, but the first time here at the lectern rather than as a musician. This week, we have Mandy Pye, Mike Crowley and James Bainbridge providing our music, our reader is my wife, Stephanie, and we must not forget John Hamblin and Steve Cooke providing the technical support, without which, these services would not be possible.

The word of the day for this service, is authority, which means the power to control or demand obedience from others. You might want to think for a moment about whose authority are you subject to. Whose instructions do you obey? It could be as simple as your partner asking you for a cup of tea in the morning, or your manager at work giving you instructions that you follow. It could be the government and those who set down the laws of the land which we should follow. It doesn't even need to be a person – we obey a red light that tells us to stop and a green light that tells us to go. There are so many different authorities that influence our lives, but there is one whose authority is supreme. That is Our God who we worship. The music group will now lead us in a song that helps us to consider his nature, Above all Powers.

Song Above all Powers

Above all powers

Above all kings

Above all nature

And all created things

Above all wisdom

And all the ways of man

You were here

Before the world began

Above all kingdoms

Above all thrones

Above all wonders

The world has ever known

Above all wealth

And treasures of the earth

There's no way to measure

What You're worth

Crucified

Laid behind a stone

You lived to die

Rejected and alone

Like a rose

Trampled on the ground

You took the fall

And thought of me

Above all

Opening Prayer

Let us Pray. Above all powers, above all kings, above all nature and created things. We come before you, Father God, as the supreme authority of the universe. For you spoke and all things were made, the works of your hand seen across the vast infinity of space, and in the beauty of nature we see all around us. In a moment of silence, let us reflect on your power and majesty.

Crucified, Laid behind a stone, You lived to die, Rejected and alone. Words that remind us that we are not forgotten. Just when we deserve to be separated from you because we have rejected your ways in favour of our own selfish ambitions, you sent your son to live as one of us, to obediently follow the path appointed to him, to die on the cross for our sins, and to triumphantly rise again to open the way for us to be reconciled with you. In a moment of silence, let us reflect on the gift of salvation made possible through your son.

Jesus said, When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. The Holy Spirit given to us, enabling us to speak about you with authority, and to be able to hear and read your word. Comforting us when we feel abandoned and alone, giving us the strength and encouragement to do things we could never imagine were possible. In a moment of silence, let us reflect on the gift of the Spirit, touching our lives in so many unexpected ways. Amen

Introduction to Reading.

Jesus did not have an easy relationship with the Pharisees, and in the reading we will hear in a moment from Matthew 22, they set out to trap him. One thing to bear in mind is that they were not supporters of the Roman rule in Israel. So there would have only been one answer to the question they asked that would have satisfied them. But the situation was made more difficult due to the involvement of a second group, the Herodians, who are not as well known as the Pharisees. But they were also Jews, but there is of course a massive clue in their name as to their allegiance - which was to Herod, who of course was king of the Jews appointed by the Romans. So this made answering the Pharisees question in a way that would satisfy everyone much more difficult. So let us hear our readings this morning.

Reading Matthew 22 v 15-22

Paying the Imperial Tax to Caesar

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius,²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

²²When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Reading Romans 13 v 1-2

13 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

Message

The BBC news headline on the morning of September 28th was for once, not about Covid, it was about the second most common subject making headlines at the moment, Donald Trump. This was the headline that alleged that in the year he became president, he paid \$750 in taxes. I don't usually remember news headlines and dates that well, but this was also the day when I first read the gospel reading set for this day, Matthew 22 v 15-22, central to which as you have heard, was also a question about the payment of taxes. A reading which seems to be encouraging people to pay the taxes that are due to them, rather than allegations of not paying enough in taxes, hence I remembered the connection.

I think that within this story, and the subsequent teaching of Jesus, which was born out of the trap that the Pharisees tried to set Jesus, is a message that does speak to us about authority. So a question that we need to ask ourselves is, to whose authority are we subject to? Among all the powers in this world, in our lives, to whom and to what are we obedient to, whose commands do we follow? There isn't a simple answer because in different situations, we are subject to many different authorities. But as Christians, there is only one ultimate, authority, of course, and that is God. He is above all Powers, above all people, all kings and rulers, above all created things, God is the true authority. For we can trust his words, we see his power in everything he has done and made. He never changes. When he spoke, the universe came into being, is there any greater authority than that, being able to command an infinite universe into existence? I was recently asked the question, how do I make sense of my faith? My response on that day was to say that it helps me to make sense of the vastness and the amazing complexity and wonder of our universe and world – as a scientist, studying aspects of how some elements of creation work, rather than diminishing my faith, it enables it to grow as the wonders of what God has made are revealed. Science for me has never challenged the authority of God, as it has for some, but helped me to appreciate it far more. Gods authority was also revealed through his commandments which still underpin most modern societies, and most wonderfully in the person of his only son, Jesus, who spoke and taught with the same authority as his Father. We have a related term, which is often used, we describe an authoritative work on a particular subject. Often, a book that provides the most reliable information on a particular subject. If we want to know about God, the authoritative work, is his Son, Jesus, who spoke his words, who said, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.

So does following the authority of God absolve us from being subject to any other lesser authority? Of course not, and this was what Jesus seems to be telling us in Matthew. Let's be clear, the Romans were not the perfect advert for a ruling government – yes, they were a great people, they made many significant technological developments to improve peoples lives, but they were also

ruthless empire builders, and as we would see later in the life of a Jesus, they played a key part in his suffering and death, and yet people are being encouraged to pay the taxes due to them, and presumably by extension, to respect their authority as rulers. There has probably never been a perfect ruling government ever, because they are all made up of imperfect humans, and I am sure we can find fault in all the current world governments, at all levels, but governments, rules, taxes, laws etc. are all essential and we can't exist without them. And as Christians, we should strive to be obedient, and respect and follow laws and rules. Why? Paul states in Romans 13 that governments are established by God, therefore it is our duty to follow. And consider the alternative, if there is no leadership, no rules, the result is lawlessness, anarchy – defined as the absence of any authority. You decide to do what you want, when you want!

In the present time, certainly during my own lifetime, following "the rules" has never been more important. COVID has led to lockdown, restrictions on movement, and travel, not meeting up with friends and family, wearing masks, quarantine.... I could go on, but you all know this very well. Our government probably has not dealt perfectly with the pandemic, which is after all something very new. They haven't always been clear in their messaging, not always got the timing right for changes to be made. But we all saw how following the rules set down for lockdown in March did make a difference and the importance of setting up the new rules. As the cases grow again, and restrictions return, it is still just as important to follow the guidance, but it does become more difficult and we now have had the term pandemic fatigue coined, when people are tired of the restrictions so stop following them. The evidence is clear that this will prolong the pandemic. It is increasing hard for our leaders as we have seen this week. And there are some clear examples of breaching the rules where people clearly think they can get away with things.

The Church at its heart, is a fellowship, where meeting together has always been at the centre, but we are not able to meet up as we would love to. Technology is great, but we do miss the worship experience we would love to have again. I'd love to be singing with a packed congregation, but we can't. But we do have a responsibility, a Christian duty to follow the guidance and to keep following as long as it is in place. It is for us a day way we can pay Caesar what is due to Caesar. And we continue to trust and pray that God will continue to bless us, no matter what form our fellowship takes.

But what happens if our government or authorities go too far. When we are asked to compromise our faith. When it is not possible to be subject to God and an earthly authority at the same time. In Acts 5, the apostles were thrown into jail because they were healing and preaching, on other words, carrying out their mission as appointed by God. And they were rescued from the jail by God and went straight back out and started teaching again. Brought in front of the Sanhedrin, and told to stop, Peter responded by saying, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" So there is a line that can be crossed when the fundamental mission and purpose of the Church is prevented by an authority when we can say enough is enough and stand up and be counted, and challenge authority, knowing we have the greater authority of God on our side. The early church knew this, and also that this led them down the road of persecution.

There may also be times when we are called to speak out against something we consider to be wrong – a historical example was the church through William Wilberforce leading the movement that led to the abolition of slavery. Today, it could be climate change, racial equality, modern slavery even. We should and indeed must have a voice in such matters – peaceful protests, lobbying, in making our voice heard.

We are subject to authorities, in every aspect of our lives. In the home, in the workplace, when you are shopping, even when you are driving a car. How we respond to each of these should be a

reflection of our relationship with God. Our every action, and relationship is part of the worshiped offer to our Lord.

Amen

Let us explore further this statement, that every aspect of our life is a part of our worship, in the song the band will lead in now. Part of verse 2 says:-

When we take instruction cheerfully,
Lord we will worship;
when we lead with Christ's humility,
Lord we will worship.

A reminder that we both take instruction from others, but we also lead sometimes, so may be an authority to others, but not forgetting a key aspect of leadership and authority should also be humility.

Song As we gather in your presence now

As we gather in your presence now,
Lord, we will worship;
as we sing our thankful songs aloud:
Lord we will worship.
When we go out in the name of Christ,
Lord we will worship;
as your word and Spirit shape our lives,
Lord we will worship.

*And whatever we do, in word or deed,
we do for the one who set us free;
when we're on our feet or on our knees,
Lord, we will worship,
Lord, we will worship.*

When we love our friends and families,
Lord, we will worship;
when we give ourselves to those in need,
Lord we will worship.
When we take instruction cheerfully,
Lord we will worship;
when we lead with Christ's humility,
Lord we will worship.

In the course of every working day,
Lord, we will worship;
when our business takes us far away,
Lord we will worship.
When we care for children in the home,
Lord we will worship;
when our audience is you alone,
Lord we will worship.

Prayers

Let us pray.

In our prayers this morning, let us begin by praying for our government and indeed all governments round the world, having to deal with the ongoing COVID pandemic. There is a tremendous challenge trying to manage the spread of the virus while attempting to minimise the impact on businesses, and on the ability of people to meet up with loved ones and with friends, and also protecting the ability of health services to cope with increasing strain. Grant to them particular wisdom to be able to listen to advice and act decisively at the right time, and also the courage to sometimes make decisions that are hard in the short term but will save lives in the longer term. We also pray for those in local government who may be resisting the changes being imposed on their areas, asking that compromises may be reached that will help to protect people at risk.

Secondly, we pray for people who have to comply with the regulations as they are passed down from each government, often changing quickly from week to week. We are aware that this means that we are not able to do live as we are used to, and can be prevented from doing things that we come to love and enjoy, such as meeting family and friends, going to work and not working from home, even being able to meet up and worship together in ways that are familiar to us. For some, the impact of course is more severe, with loss of jobs, and livelihoods, and many are left lonely when others are not able to visit them. For some, having to shield because of medical conditions makes this even more difficult. But Lord, help us to tolerate the hard times now, and to be compliant now, so we can be able to move out if the most severe restrictions as soon as possible.

Thirdly, a prayer for those who are still working hard to develop treatments and vaccines for Covid. Much is promised but may the science be followed, so treatments when available are safe, and not rushed just because of the urgent need we face.

For ourselves, let us pray that in situations when we lead others, may we do so with authority but also steeped in humility, as we know that Jesus taught as that no master is ever too great to be a servant also. But help us also to follow the authority of others, and most preciously, to follow you. And when we face that challenge when there is conflict between worldly authority and the mission that you have appointed us to, help us to be bold, to have courage, and to put you first.

Amen

Now as is the custom at these streamed services, I invite everyone to share in the Lords Prayer together, using whatever version you are most comfortable using.

Our father in heaven hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

I would like to close by thanking Mandy, Mike, James, Stephanie, John and Steve for their participation morning and close with a blessing.

God our Father, by whose mercy
the world turns safely into darkness and returns again to light:
we place in your hands our unfinished tasks,
our unsolved problems, and our unfulfilled hopes,
knowing that only what you bless will prosper.
To your love and protection
we commit each other and all those we love,
knowing that you alone are our sure defender,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Song At the Name of Jesus

1 At the name of Jesus ev'ry knee shall bow,
ev'ry tongue confess him King of glory now.
'Tis the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word.

2 Humbled for a season to receive a name
from the lips of sinners unto whom he came,
faithfully he bore it spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious, when from death he passed.

3 Bore it up triumphant, with it's human light
Through all ranks of creatures to the central height
To the throne of Godhead to the Father's breast
Filled it with the glory of that perfect rest

4 In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue
all that is not holy, all that is not true;
crown him as your Captain in temptation's hour:
let his will enfold you in its light and pow'r.

5 For this same Lord Jesus shall return again,
with his Father's glory, with his angel train;
all the wreaths of empire meet upon his brow,
and our hearts confess him King of glory now.

