

By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship

Make a joyful noise to our amazing God, all the earth;  
sing the glory of his name;  
give to him glorious praise.

Hymn 72

Father God, I wonder How I  
managed to exist without the  
knowledge of Your parenthood  
and Your loving care

But now I am Your child,  
and I am adopted in Your family

And I can never be alone  
'Cause Father God, You're there beside me

I will sing your praises (3)  
Forever more

I will sing your praises (3)  
Forever more

Prayer of Approach

Lord we come to worship You in the name of our wonderful Saviour.  
We are here to honour You.  
You made us to sing your praises  
And that is what we will do every day of our lives.  
Amen

Prayer of Confession

Heavenly Father, we confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed. We have not loved You with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. Forgive us our sins, and help us to love you more deeply and serve you more faithfully from this day forward.

We thank You for accepting us in spite of our weaknesses and we accept Your assurance of forgiveness with joy.  
Amen

Lord's Prayer

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 for ever. Amen

Readings

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' <sup>21</sup> They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the

emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

### Isaiah 45:1-7

<sup>1</sup> Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,  
whose right hand I have grasped  
to subdue nations before him  
and strip kings of their robes,  
to open doors before him—  
and the gates shall not be closed:  
<sup>2</sup> I will go before you  
and level the mountains,<sup>[a]</sup>  
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze  
and cut through the bars of iron,  
<sup>3</sup> I will give you the treasures of darkness  
and riches hidden in secret places,  
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,  
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of my servant Jacob,  
and Israel my chosen,  
I call you by your name,  
I surname you, though you do not know me.  
<sup>5</sup> I am the Lord, and there is no other;  
besides me there is no god.  
I arm you, though you do not know me,  
<sup>6</sup> so that they may know, from the rising of the sun  
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;  
I am the Lord, and there is no other.  
<sup>7</sup> I form light and create darkness,  
I make weal and create woe;  
I the Lord do all these things.

### Reflection

In 1789, Benjamin Franklin famously said

*“Nothing is certain except death and taxes.”*

Of course, as Christians, we can quickly come up with other certainties, but the point remains that tax is one of those things which is inescapable for anybody who receives an income of more than £12,570 a year. Tax may be an annoyance for some, more so if we find ourselves resenting the way in which the Government spends portions of what we see as our hard earned money. Remember the anger when the UK joined the USA in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 – not only did many citizens feel that this was morally questionable, but it was funded with *our* taxes.

Most of us, at various times, are opposed to the decisions and actions of those in power over us and this is true in all countries. It was certainly true of First Century Palestine. At that time, the Romans ruled this Mediterranean area (modern day Israel), where Jesus was born and lived his earthly life. In the hierarchy of power, the Jews enjoyed self-government but had to report to the authority of the local Roman government (King Herod), which reported to Rome (Emperor Caesar). The Jews were required to pay tax to the Roman government and this was deeply resented, understandably, since the tax would go into Caesar's treasury and would fund the building and maintenance of pagan temples. When we read the Gospels, tax collectors (Jews working for the Roman rulers) are frequently used as examples of the foremost of sinners.

This was the context in which both the Pharisees and the Herodians were questioning Jesus in our Gospel reading. They begin their questioning with flattery:

*‘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.’*

However, they then go on to test Jesus. The question that they ask may well reflect a justified anxiety about showing any disloyalty to Rome. The Pharisees were opposed to Roman rule; the Herodians, a political party, were supporters of King Herod Antipas and the policies of Rome. Generally these two groups were enemies, but here they united against Jesus in what must have seemed a foolproof plan to catch Him out with the question:

*‘Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’*

Caesar's image on the Roman coins, along with the inscription ‘Son of God,’ unambiguously depicted him as divine. It was a constant reminder of Israel's subjection, so if Jesus agreed that paying tax to Caesar was the right thing to do, the Pharisees could accuse Him of opposition to God, of supporting pagan worship. If He said that the Jews should *not* pay, the Herodians could accuse Him of rebellion and hand Him over to Herod. The motivation of these two groups was clearly *not* love of God or love of Rome, but a shared desire to bring Jesus down.

Jesus' response was to ask his questioners to show him a denarius, a Roman coin. He was demonstrating that loyalty to God does not mean that we must disobey worldly authorities. Palestine was ruled by Rome so the emperor had the right to demand tax and the Jews must pay. However, they were to "give to God the things that are God's" – their worship and obedience to God's law. Now, as then, we must pay the tax demanded by our Government, however much we may object to its policies and actions.

Our reading from Isaiah is also concerned with the role of earthly leaders. Cyrus II, known as Cyrus the Great, was the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, the First Persian Empire. He reigned for about thirty years and conquered a huge area of the Middle East and beyond. The people of Israel were living in exile in Babylon when Cyrus conquered that city and it was he who authorized and encouraged the return of the Israelites to the Land of Israel, thus freeing them from an exile which had lasted for seventy years.

The history is interesting, but more relevant for us is *God's* part in the restoration of His people. Isaiah 45:1:

*"Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus"*

This is the only place in the Bible where a Gentile ruler is said to be "anointed," a word otherwise used for Israel's kings, priests and, of course, Jesus. It means consecrated, made sacred, chosen by God. The fact that Cyrus, a non Jew, was said to be anointed demonstrates God's total sovereignty and His control over the outworking of history. As already mentioned, Cyrus was an extremely successful ruler who had amassed vast wealth and power. On a cylinder inscription from 538BC, he attributes his great successes to a god of Babylon, Marduk. He would have known of the God of the Jews, Yahweh, but only as one of a number of deities worshipped in those days, so the freeing of the Jews was, to his mind, a fairly minor episode in his career. In reality though, there is but one God, who was carrying out His supreme purpose. Reading through the Isaiah passage again, we see that, whatever power Cyrus had, he was simply being led and manipulated by God to do *His* will. The freeing of the Jews was the true climax of Cyrus' career.

Both of our passages today are concerned with the relative power of worldly authority. From the Gospel reading:

*'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's'*

God allows earthly authority to exist, to have some power over us, and make certain demands of us. To God we are to give what is God's – our worship, our love and obedience. In this country there is rarely a clash, but we see on the news the suffering which is inflicted on our brethren in places where Christianity is not tolerated.

Does God use modern day leaders as He did Cyrus. We have no reason *not* to think so - our Isaiah reading is a clear lesson that God stage-manages the great sweep of history, a history so vast that we mortals cannot take the long view. We can take comfort from that and know that it is entirely appropriate to pray for wisdom for our leaders, however hopeless it seems from world events.

Hear Jesus' words in John 16:33:

*'In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!'*

### Prayer of Intercession

Father we pray for all those who cry out to you from the depths of despair  
For those who ache with grief and loneliness after the loss of loved ones  
For those who are seriously ill and long for relief from pain and uncertainty  
For those who desperately wish that their lives were different, healthy and happy

Father we pray for those suffering in the wider world whose pain and anguish we find it hard to imagine  
For those in countries where medical help is not freely available, and for courage and strength for local medical staff  
For those where crops have failed and where war and conflict have created famine  
For those affected by disease and lack of clean water  
For those who weep from powerlessness in the face of uncaring governments.  
We pray too for those in power, that You will grant them wisdom and use them as You used Cyrus, to accomplish Your will.

We thank you for giving us Jesus

For the hope and healing offered to all who put faith in Him  
We ask for healing for our world, in which only You can know the extent of suffering and pain  
We ask for patience and understanding of Your timeframe and for faith in the great hope that is set before us

We bring our prayers in the name of Jesus, who walks beside us, whatever we go through  
Amen

### Hymn 76

Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising.  
Give me joy in my heart, I pray.  
Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising.  
Keep me praising till the break of day.

#### Refrain:

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,  
sing hosanna to the King of kings!  
Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,  
sing hosanna to the King!

Give me peace in my heart, keep me resting.  
Give me peace in my heart, I pray.  
Give me peace in my heart, keep me resting.  
Keep me resting till the break of day. [Refrain]

Give me love in my heart, keep me serving.  
Give me love in my heart, I pray.  
Give me love in my heart, keep me serving.  
Keep me serving till the break of day. [Refrain]

### Blessing

Be strengthened now for the week ahead, in the sure knowledge of the peace, hope, joy and truth of Jesus, who will love and care for us now and forever

Amen