



Annual Appeal

October 18, 2020: The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

O Lord: take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire.

So today is the day when we begin our Annual Appeal; when the preacher tries his homiletical best to stir the community into a frenzy of deeper financial generosity; when listeners, moved by the Holy Spirit, make haste to write a check and put the envelope in the US Mail, or click the [donate online button](#); or use all their fingers to text CCN123 to 73256; when all of our financial worries evaporate into thin air on the wings of the Holy Spirit.

But we'll do that later.

I want to take you to Paul's church in Thessalonica in the year 51. This is the very beginning of the first letter that we have from Paul, the earliest sense we have of what the first Christian communities were like. It describes a lively Christian community in the upper part of Greece, a thriving port town that was an important communications nexus, and the largest city in the Roman province of Macedonia.

<https://www.biblica.com/resources/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-1-thessalonians/>

This community is one of love, prayer and action, full of works of faith, steadfastness of hope and labors of love in the name of Christ. The community is also enduring a time of persecution yet remains faithful to Jesus in its love of one another and its neighbors. One of its preoccupations, clearer in other parts of the Thessalonian correspondence, is the nearness of the end—that Jesus was thought to be returning imminently—and how should we be living our lives in the meantime?

Without drawing parallels that are too close—the Church today is living in a time something like persecution. In addition to attacks on basic truth-telling and compassion, we are enduring the prolonged danger of the corona virus, and the accompanying injustice and social unrest that the unequal effects of the virus have revealed to those who had not seen, or not bothered to see, before.

While Paul does get somewhat caught up in the mechanics of Jesus' return – there is a section later in this letter about meeting Jesus in the air when he comes again—Paul's response to the Thessalonians is this: keep doing what you are doing. Keep being the church. Keep loving God, one another and your neighbors.

A similar exhortation is conveyed several centuries by later by one of the Rabbis quoted in the Talmud who said, "If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, stay and finish the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah." Keep at it. Keep faithful.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avot_of_Rabbi_Natan,

http://images.shulcloud.com/618/uploads/PDFs/Divrei_Torah/tenjewish.pdf

I also want to take us to Southern Turkey in the latter part of the 1st century, where Matthew's Gospel may have been written, under the boot of Roman authority. In the Gospel reading today, we are also



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presented with an issue relevant to our church and to our time. What are the proper priorities—political, social, and financial—for the Church of God? The community that produced Matthew’s Gospel remembers Jesus confounding his hostile interlocutors on this urgent question. In fact, the communities that produced Mark and Luke *also* recall Jesus’s famous and profound “gotcha” encounter.

And notice how Jesus not only refuses to answer outright the insincere question, but instead throws a query back on his questioners—and, not only on them in the story, but on to us and our priorities; we’re not hostile, but perhaps in need of inspiration and clarification some 2000 years later.

“Give therefore to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Part of the logic of Jesus’ response is strategic. Rome is in charge and brooks no undermining of the emperor’s authority. That was true when Jesus was bodily alive in ministry in Galilee, but also 2 generations later when Matthew was written, and when the Romans had already destroyed the Temple. Even a little splinter sect like the Jesus followers at the time of Matthew needed to be careful not to poke the bear.

And in our own day, when there is in our environment no danger of persecution because of our faith, it may be even more difficult to take Jesus seriously. As with so many of Jesus’ teachings, we are required to struggle and reflect and wrestle with what exactly it is he expects from us. Not in a sort of teacherly “guess what I’m thinking” way, but in a way that makes our answers a sign of intention and commitment, that we own.

What is it exactly that we owe to the Emperor, to our political system, to our government? Is it just to pay taxes? Is it the obligations of Citizenship? What exactly are those?

To be politically informed and to encourage others to do so? To vote and to encourage others to do so? More broadly, to participate in efforts to create a more perfect union? To build the kingdom of God on earth? How do we do that in a not run afoul of the 1st Amendment?

And what is it that we owe to God especially in this time, a time that’s *not* exactly the end times, perhaps, that for which the Thessalonians were preparing, but in *our* time, the likes of which most of us alive today have never seen?

To love God and neighbor as Jesus teaches. To keep loving God and neighbor as Jesus teaches. **AND THAT IS WHAT WE ARE DOING HERE AT CHRIST CHURCH.**

We keep loving God in our worship—thanks to intrepid musicians and technicians and lectors and intercessors and Facebook ushers, and dozens of households who have participated in worship either here at the church or recorded from home. The Wednesday Bible Study keeps Zooming God’s Word. MANNA cooks and bakers and sandwich makers and drivers keep serving. B-Love Grocery Baggers keep filling bags with groceries to feed families in Boston. The Men’s Prayer group keeps praying, Our Vestry



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keeps meeting; our Property and Finance committees keep meeting, taking care of business. Our Racial Justice Team will be meeting soon. Our Regathering Team has been monitoring the virus and will be reassessing this week when and how it is safe to regather for in person worship again. Our Pastoral Response Ministry team keeps making phone calls and writing notes and supporting parishioners in need of loving care. Our Intercessory Prayers are praying away. Our Church School is putting together activities and lessons and gatherings. Our staff keeps working at ways to support the mission of the church in this unusual time. All this and more.

THIS is what it means to give to God the things that are God's. And it has been amazing to be a part of it.

Now more than ever, our ministry needs the foundation of your support. And in particular we need funding to continue our tradition of excellent musical section leaders, to underwrite a part-time position to nurture Christian formation of our Children and Youth, and to make sure we have the technological means to offer hybrid, broadcast worship when it is safe to gather in person again.

It can feel hard to give during times of uncertainty. But we have so much to share and we are already doing it. We have a God whose giving knows no ending—as our opening hymn reminds us. We have a firm foundation because it has been built on God's generosity, and our response to that generosity is to continue love to God and our neighbor. Even in the face of pandemic, we live in the truth that God is with us and gives us courage for the facing of this hour. I invite us all to remember that truth, and to give generously. Thank you.

Amen.