



## Online Circuit Service

Sunday 18 October 2020 10.30am

*All the music in today's service has been chosen by members of the Methodist churches in Burham, Eccles, Larkfield & East Malling, and Tonbridge Road. All hymns will be displayed on the screen – there is no need to open separate tabs if you are sharing in the service via YouTube.*

**Music before the service begins:** Said Judas to Mary  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBpVRD00Py8>)

*Chosen by June Mitchell (Tonbridge Road Methodist Church): "I just love the hymn 'Said Judas to Mary now what will you do' because it shows her love for Jesus but it is no longer in our hymn books."*

... followed by 'Stay alert to justice' (Joint Public Issues Team):  
[https://youtu.be/Fu\\_fZqc0qGs](https://youtu.be/Fu_fZqc0qGs)

### Welcome and introduction

**Hymn:** Lord of all hopefulness (StF 526)  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCBjxVP6GWE>)

*Chosen by John and Valerie Thornewell (Larkfield & East Malling Methodist Church): "Being hopeful is always important, but especially in these difficult times. The hymn takes the singer through each section of the day, reminding us all that God is with us ALL THE TIME. We sang this at our wedding 42 years ago, and it is still very special."*

### Opening prayers of adoration and confession

**Reading:** Matthew 22:15-22 (read by Stefan Carney – the Church in Burham)

**Hymn:** Dear Lord and Father of mankind (StF 495)  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1MN3chW1Hk>)

*Chosen by John Young (Tonbridge Road Methodist Church): "I find that this speaks to me, possibly because my life used to be so hectic that I liked the rare times of quiet. In the days when we used hymn books I showed off by keeping the book closed."*

### Reflection

I have a sneaking suspicion that today's reading appears where it does in the lectionary as a not-so-subtle reminder that ministers need to file their tax returns by the end of October. Having just completed my first year in ministry (admittedly, not quite the year I expected!), this is the first time I've had to file a 'minister of religion' tax form and, I have to confess, I didn't relish it. Maths has never been my strong suit, and I spent far too long trying to decide whether doing laps of the lake in Regent's Park on a pedalo qualifies me as a 'seafarer.' So part of me is a little disappointed that, when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees and the Herodians whether his followers were expected to pay their taxes, he didn't respond by saying that we needn't bother.

In this portion of Matthew's Gospel (the Gospel, of course, named after a tax collector) the religious leaders approach Jesus with a series of four questions, designed to trip him up and to make him say something incriminating. They come asking about taxes, then the resurrection, then the commandments, and then the promised Messiah. The fact that their first question was about the paying of taxes suggests that they felt this was a fairly safe bet – that Jesus was bound to say something that would enable them to turn him over to the Romans and guarantee his arrest, thereby ridding themselves of this troublesome teacher from Nazareth.

But, instead, Jesus asked them to bring him a coin, and then asked them whose image was stamped upon it. 'The emperor's,' they replied, not quite sure where this was leading. And then Jesus said to them: 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' Matthew tells us that the leaders were so amazed, so baffled, by his reply, that they simply left and went away, to work on their next difficult question.

I wonder why they were so sure that Jesus would say something that would get him into trouble if they asked him about paying taxes? Perhaps because this wasn't Jesus' first brush with the subject (cf Matthew 17:24-27). Perhaps because some of his followers were clearly hoping that Jesus was biding his time before leading an outright rebellion against the Roman occupiers. Perhaps because Jesus seemed to have a different relationship with 'the rules' from the kind the religious leaders usually encouraged – back in Matthew 12, when Jesus' disciples got themselves into trouble for picking and eating grain on the sabbath, the Jewish day of rest, Jesus told the Pharisees that 'something greater than the temple is here... For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.' The same day, he cured a man with a withered hand, right under the noses of the religious leaders. He reminded them that they would help an animal that fell into a pit on the sabbath – and so why should he, Jesus, wait one more day before offering the gift of healing to a human being? The Pharisees had no answer, but from that moment, they began cooking up difficult questions that might get Jesus into trouble, and off their hands.

But in thinking that Jesus would have no regard for the rules around taxes, and that he would openly encourage his followers to defy them, I wonder if the Pharisees and the Herodians had misunderstood something fairly fundamental about Jesus' ministry. At the heart of Jesus' ministry lay the belief that the things of this world *matter*. Colossians 1 tells us that in Jesus, all things in heaven *and* on earth were created, including earthly powers and dominions, and that in him, all things are held together. Through Jesus' life,

death and resurrection, God 'was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:20).

When God took on flesh and walked among us in the person of Jesus, he showed us that he is truly, deeply interested in the 'stuff' of our everyday lives – including our tax returns! Sometimes, it's easy to put in separate boxes what we do and think and say at church on a Sunday, and what we do and think and say – and earn and pay and vote – the rest of the week.

Richard Murphy, the author of 'The Joy of Tax,' argues that tax isn't about forms and technicalities, but 'fundamentally about the ideas that shape the sort of society we want to live in.' And surely, our faith has something to say about the sort of society we want to help shape.

What we do with our money *matters*. In our churches, we're brilliant at raising money for charity, and when the church roof needs repairing. But I wonder how comfortable we feel talking with each other about how we use our personal finances – and about what we, as Christians, think and feel about the big financial issues of the day? About the furlough scheme? About Government investment in green energy? About the living wage?

And yet, if we were to try and base our conversations with one another on the subjects that Jesus spent most of his time talking about (according to the Gospel writers), we'd find ourselves talking about money an awful lot more. Forbes Magazine suggests that money and possessions are the second most popular subject in the Bible, with well over 2000 references. The Bible is deeply interested in our tax returns, because how we use our money is indicative of the kind of society that we have decided we want to shape.

Of course, this is not to say that you should feel guilty or, worse, unwelcome at church if you're not in a position to give financially. Jesus made it very clear that, in his eyes, the kingdom of heaven belongs to those living in poverty on earth, and that the smallest gift – even the widow's mite – has great value in God's eyes. Today, we recognise that times are hard for a great many people; it is thought that six million people in the UK have fallen behind on rent, council tax and other household bills because of coronavirus and almost one in five have borrowed money to pay for everyday essentials such as food. The Church can – and must – be a place of safety and sanctuary for those in need. John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, in his sermon 'On the use of money' emphasised the importance of ensuring, first of all, that your own family are safe and fed: "Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind?"

But all of us have choices to make about how we use our money. All of us have voices we can raise about issues in our society. How often do we consciously do so as followers of Christ?

Earlier this month, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Church Action on Poverty, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church launched the Reset the Debt campaign, calling on the Government to create a Jubilee Fund to provide

grants to pay off and cancel unavoidable debt accrued by the poorest households during the lockdown.

In the Old Testament, the principle of 'Jubilee' meant that on a regular basis, land would be returned to people, resources shared, slaves freed, land rested, and debts forgiven. It's a revolutionary thought in today's society. Based on the Bible, we can argue that our duty as Christians is to pay our taxes and to follow the rules. But equally, we can argue that there are times when we must be the ones to point to another, better way – one that reflects the values of the kingdom of God. We recognise that the image of God is stamped on every single human being, just as the image of the emperor was stamped on the coin that was handed to Jesus. And so we must do all we can to protect those children of God who are living in poverty – to ensure that resources are shared and dignity restored.

Supporters of the Reset the Debt campaign are asked to write to their MP and support the campaign online and in their church communities. You can read the report and find out how to get involved (including an easy online form allowing you to email your MP) at [resetthedebt.uk](http://resetthedebt.uk).

So I wonder – I wonder what kind of society you want to help to shape. I wonder how what we do with our money, as individuals and as a society, might help to move us in that direction. I wonder how we might have these conversations with our friends at church. I wonder – if it might be time to put our money where our faith is?

'Reset the Debt' video: <https://youtu.be/n3TQqAtfWfg>

Prayers of intercession – led by the Kasongo family (Tonbridge Road Methodist Church)

### The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: O Jesus I have promised (StF 563) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oti-K\\_VvyCl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oti-K_VvyCl))

*Chosen by Christine Malins (Larkfield & East Malling Methodist Church): "O Jesus I have Promised' is the most important one to me as I made a promise that I would follow Jesus after my son had a serious accident and I prayed for his recovery that if He made him better I would follow Him for the rest of my life and He did and I have."*

### Blessing