

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10: *Paul expresses joy and gratitude for the Thessalonian church, for their faith, hope and love, and sharing the gospel despite their suffering. From: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To: the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Grace and peace to all of you. We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

Matthew 22:15-22: *The religious leaders try to trap Jesus. He responds by asking for a coin, and asking whose inscription is on it. When they reply that it is Caesar's, Jesus tells them to give Caesar what is Caesar's and to give God what is God's.*

Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are genuine and that you teach God's way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people's opinions, because you don't show favoritism. So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used to pay the tax." And they brought him a denarion. "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked. "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

COCU61A Readings

The readings this week bring together two powerful and complementary ideas. In the continuous Old Testament reading, we are invited with Moses to seek God's glory and to rely on God's presence to empower and guide us as we interact with our world. In the Gospel Jesus challenges us to "render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's". In the intersection of these two ideas lies an amazing call – to enter the world in intimate connection with God, such that God's glory is revealed through us in all times and places, even as we seek to discern as clearly as we can what is "God's" and what is "Caesar's" – in other words, maintaining a clear distinction between our role as people of faith, and our role as citizens of the world. The struggle for us is to work out how to maintain an appropriate separation between "church" and "state" while still operating in our world completely as followers of Christ.

Jesus' response to the attempted entrapment of the religious leaders is a powerful and challenging word. Where they have missed God and God's new, creative work among them, and have fallen into domesticating God to their purposes, Jesus challenges them to put God into the proper place of sovereignty and majesty in their lives. Essentially Jesus turns their question on its head and bypasses the tax question, confronting the leaders with the insignificance of things like taxation in the face of God's greater claim on our worship and our lives. In a faith culture in which it is often popular for God to be reduced to simply a divine friend, or "the man up there", or a "higher" part of ourselves, this call to recognise God's transcendence is important and life-giving.

When we remember that everywhere we live and act we do so in Christ's name and in God's presence, we no longer need to "impose God" on situations where religious practice, ethics or control is inappropriate.

When we remember our faith, hope and love (as the Thessalonians did) we are able to render to God what is God's – our lives, our devotion and our commitment to reflect the character and purpose of Christ – and we are able to render to Caesar what is Caesar's – our commitment to live as good citizens, to pay our "dues" whatever they may be, in service of the country where we live, and our voice to challenge what is unjust and to support and strengthen what is good, and just and peaceful. While at times these ways of being will overlap, in our hearts and minds we do well to keep the distinction clear, and to seek to act and interact appropriately according to the "realm" in which we find ourselves.

(John van de Laar, sacredise.com)

Psalm 99: *A call to honour and worship God, because God is holy and mighty, and has answered Moses, Aaron and Samuel when they prayed, and shown that God is forgiving and just.*

The Lord rules - **the nations shake!**

God sits enthroned on the winged heavenly creatures -
the earth quakes!

The Lord is great in Zion;

God is exalted over all the nations.

Let them thank your great and awesome name.

God is holy!

Strong king who loves justice,

you are the one who established what is fair.

You worked justice and righteousness in Jacob.

Magnify the Lord, our God!

Bow low at God's footstool! God is holy!

Moses and Aaron were among God's priests,

Samuel too among those who called on God's name.

They cried out to the Lord,

and God answered them, from a pillar of cloud.

They kept the laws and the rules God gave to them.

Lord our God, you answered them.

To them you were a God who forgives

but also the one who avenged their wrong deeds.

Magnify the Lord our God!

Bow low at his holy mountain

because the Lord our God is holy!

Alternative Psalm 96:1-9 (10-13): *A call to sing to God and praise God's name, because God is mighty, majestic and beautiful and God deserves to be worshipped, and God is coming to judge the earth justly with righteousness and truth.*

Exodus 33:12-23: *Moses pleads with God for God's presence to go with the Israelites, which is what will distinguish them from other nations, and God promises to do so. Then Moses asks to see God's glory and God agrees to pass by Moses, speaking God's name, while hiding Moses in a cleft in the rock, and then to then allow Moses to see God's back, but not God's face.*

Moses said to the Lord, "Look, you've been telling me, 'Lead these people forward.' But you haven't told me whom you will send with me.

Yet you've assured me, 'I know you by name and think highly of you.'

Now if you do think highly of me, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people."

The Lord replied, "I'll go myself, and I'll help you."

Moses replied, "If you won't go yourself, don't make us leave here.

Because how will anyone know that we have your special approval, both I and your people, unless you go with us? Only that distinguishes us, me and your people, from every other people on the earth."

The Lord said to Moses, "I'll do exactly what you've asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name."

Moses said, "Please show me your glorious presence."

The Lord said, "I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord.' I will be kind to whomever I

wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate. But," the Lord said, "you can't see my face because no one can see me and live."

The Lord said, "Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible."

Isaiah 45:1-7 (alternative Old Testament reading): *A prophecy about Cyrus and how God has prepared his way and given him power and position for the sake of God's people, though he does not know God, and God has strengthened him so that the whole world will know that God is God.*