

Grace Episcopal Church
 The 21st Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 24
 The Sunday Closest to October 19
 October 22, 2023

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Listen again to the beginning of the Collect of the Day we just prayed: “Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations.” In that prayer we affirmed that God has revealed an essential aspect of his divine being to all people in and through the Risen Christ. We didn’t tell God anything that God did not already know. That opening line was for our benefit more than it was for God’s. And it’s not original. We didn’t come up with it ourselves. We received it from our predecessors, from our mothers and fathers in the faith stretching all the way back to that first group of followers of Jesus.

It’s a good way to start a worship service. We need to remember that prayer is about us, but about who we are as well as what we want. And while prayer is about us, it’s not *all* about us. That opening prayer line also gives us a “heads up” as to what today’s lessons are about. It introduces a theme that runs through the readings. The theme is this: Christ reveals God’s glory.

The Old Testament lesson set the stage. It laid the foundation. Moses asked God, “Show me your ways,” and God did, and the whole encounter reveals the basic, foundational truth that the God of Israel is a revealing God. The God of Israel unveils truths about the world, about people, about the future, but also God’s own ways. When we prayed “Almighty God, you have revealed your glory among the nations,” all we did was echo the ancient realization, handed down to us across the generations by the people of this God, all the way back to Moses.

Actually, the Old Testament lesson did more than set the stage. It showed us that God is a revealing God, but it also extended that revelation. It advanced the argument by qualifying God’s revelation. Moses told God, “Show me your glory.” And God said, “Whoa! Settle down there, cowboy! You can’t handle my glory. So tell you what I’ll do: I’ll let you catch a glimpse of it. I’ll set you in a cave, and I’ll pass before you, and you’ll experience some of who I am, but not all of who I am. If you saw it all it would overwhelm you.” And that’s exactly what happened.

It’s a great story. It teaches us that God reveals, and it also shows us that God is beyond our comprehension, overwhelming. And it shows us that God is merciful. Moses asked for something that would have killed him, so God obliged him, but in a way that didn’t kill him. You know what that sounds like? A good parent. Dare I say it? — that sounds like a father who cares for his young child enough to give him or her what they ask for but without harming them.

The story is also entertaining, and the entertainment comes from a joke. God was merciful to Moses, and said “I’ll not show you my face; I’ll show you my back.” Actually, in the old Hebrew manuscripts of this story, God does not use the word “back.” The word there is “backside.” God said, “I’ll let you see my backside.” That’s the joke, and it’s more than a dad-joke. It’s almost racy; God being a bit rascally!

The New Testament lessons build on the revelation of the Old Testament. They don’t replace the Old Testament or supersede it; they extend it. Today’s Epistle and Gospel readings say “yes, and.” “Yes, God is self-revealing, *and* Jesus of Nazareth is the full revelation of God.” Our tradition affirms that we see God in the life and work of Jesus. From the Incarnation of Christ to his Second Coming, we see God. You want to see more than the backside of God without being overwhelmed? Look at Jesus.”

Actually, today’s Gospel only introduces this further extension of the Old Testament foundation. Matthew 22 merely *begins* the further revelation, and it will be developed and expanded over the next several weeks, between now and the First Sunday of Advent.

Jesus and the disciples finally arrived in Jerusalem. They've been moving toward the capital city for the last five months, through the long green season after Pentecost. This morning they've made it, and they've set up a teaching base in the courtyard of the temple. The Pharisees heard about the teaching base, and tried to shut it down. They thought nobody should teach about God but themselves, so they sent their students to discredit Jesus and shut him up.

So the students asked Jesus a trick question: "Teacher, tell us: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" They thought they would corner Jesus by asking an "either/or" question. They thought, "However he answers this one, he's going to offend somebody."

Jesus knew what they were doing, and He gave them his famous answer. "Show me a coin." They showed him a coin, and he held it up and asked, "Whose image is on this coin?" And they said, "Uh. The emperor's?" And Jesus said, "Right. So give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and give to God what belongs to God."

It's a great answer, one that avoids the "either-or" trap by means of a "both-and" answer. "Yes, paying taxes is important, *and* so is our relationship with God." Both-and, not either-or. And it's "both-and" in the proper order. Our relationship with God is more important because of who God is and who we are. We're made in God's image, not the emperor's image. There are bigger issues at stake than taxes to Rome, and those issues have to do with God's kingdom, who we are in that kingdom and who God is over it. A life-giving relationship with God is what really matters.

Everybody who heard Jesus that day was amazed, and the students just walked away. People thought, "That was amazing! Did you hear Jesus put those Pharisees in their place? Let's keep an eye on him. He's glorious—He just might reveal God's glory." It was the beginning of the revelation that we affirmed in the opening prayer, "God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations." We'll see more of the Glory of God in Christ in the weeks to come.

The Epistle reading extends the insight even further. If we had more time, we could go into it more deeply. Paul was grateful for the Thessalonian believers, for the good times they had together and the work they did together "in the Lord." He appreciated their witness, how through them the Word of God went out to the Macedonians, and the Achaians, and to the whole world. Those Thessalonians did exactly what this morning's Collect was talking about. They persevered with steadfast faith, confessing God's name throughout the world. Basically, we began worship this morning praying that we might be like those Thessalonians, that we might steadfastly reveal the glory of God in Christ in all the world.

May God's spirit empower us as the Church to keep doing just that. Let's be the Body of Christ who reveals to our neighbors God's face in Jesus, God's glory in our time and place. Amen.