

On Tuesday night some of us were present as John Parry was welcomed as the new minister for St Andrew's and also as Co-Director of London Inter Faith Centre with Fr Laurence. It was a very interesting service in which a number of different people spoke given their reflections on the post and on John, and who God is. John is the first United Reformed Minister to be offered a House for Duty post and so the service was quite unique as they had not completed one in the past. I know that one of the questions the group planning the service had considered was the best way to give due honour to the different aspects of John's role, but also to the fact that he is also retired, as well as honour that God is at the heart of this appointment. It is an interesting question – how do we symbolically recognise the different aspects and components of our lives, and that God is with us.

Then later in the week I went to meet with a family in preparation for a funeral next week. Their Father who died a few weeks ago was nearly 101 years old, and again the question was asked – how do we recognise and give thanks for such a long life which has had so many different phases in a time period that has changed so much since he was born. How do we thank God?

It is not just a question that we face in the later part of life however, how we honour the different aspects and components of our lives without doing dishonour to others parts is a question that I guess most of us have had to face at some time or another. At some point we have to choose between different people or causes or priorities. Sometimes I guess those choices are easy – our love for one is stronger than another – but sometimes it can be difficult. I can still remember the first time I chose something in my own life as a priority over my family of origin – in fact my brother even reminds me of it at times. And sometimes these choices are not decisions at all, but a situation or a relationship will mean that only one option is possible, though that may depend on the perspective we take, or the power that we feel that we have in a given situation. It may ever depend on the courage we have at the time to be open to where God is leading us; and our willingness to acknowledge that God is at the heart of it all.

Both our reading from Exodus and Matthew this week are the continuation, or next instalments of stories we heard last week – and they explore the theme of perspective, choices, and power and place of God in our lives.

After the golden calf incident, which we heard last week (you may remember Moses went up the mountain for 40 days to pray, and while

he was gone the Israelites melted down their gold, fashioned a golden calf and worshiped that instead) Moses smashed the tablets (on which the covenant was written), argued with Aaron, castigated the people, and continued to plead the Israelites' case with God. God is not happy. God instructs Moses to continue the journey and lead the people of Israel to the new land, but the people mourn when they hear God has decreed not to go with them.

Against this background, Moses now proceeds to intercede with God on behalf of the people. Moses pitches his tent outside the camp, and God speaks with Moses almost “face to face.”

After a number of recorded exchanges Moses says to God: It's not enough, I need to know you are going with the people. If we do not experience your presence, then we will not move forward. How else will I/we know that we are special to you?

I wonder how many times in our lives we have muttered the same prayer to God? How do we know God? How do we know God is there?

The plea and insecurity of humanity does not seem to have changed in many millennia – we continue to cry out to God – how do we know?

It is good however for us to learn from the story of Moses that we might have similar questions – but also to hear what Moses learnt. As the Israelites overcome this temporary separation, it in turn enhances the centrality of God in their lives. When God says to Moses “I know you by name,” it expresses the desire of the human heart; to know that God is at the core of our being and that we are known by God who is at the heart of everything.

The story of Moses records so much of the ongoing experience of humanity – we have choices to make and sometimes they are difficult choices, but we want to know that God is with us. Similarly we want to find ways to acknowledge the journey that we are on.

In a sense it is a story and a lesson in perspective.

Which brings us to our reading from our Gospel, which again continues a story from last week. Jesus is getting closer to his death, and the religious leaders are trying to find a reason to arrest Jesus, and so they keep asking more and more difficult political questions which would give them cause to find him guilty of sedition.

Last week, Jesus challenges the community to hear that God did not want to exclude, and this week he goes further – as he answers the question ‘to whom should we pay taxes?’ I guess most realise that this is a trick question – for to choose one side would upset the other – does Jesus support the Jewish or Roman Authority? Jesus answer

is very clever, and also provides us with great insight into how we deal with perspective and also our responsibility as faithful people.

Having said this, his answer is also very difficult to interpret – I do not think, as it is often quoted, that this answer is about a separation between church and state, or politics and faith. Like a lot of things Jesus said, these words are hard to pin down to just one meaning. The richness and subtlety of the answer is enhanced when we remember that Matthew's Jesus has already spoken on the subject of money and divided loyalties: "No one can serve two masters;"

The phrasing which Jesus uses about whose image is on the coin, also links back the open image of creation – for humanity is made in the image of God – so while the head of the Emperor is on the coin, the Emperor – like each of us is made in God's image!

One thing, at least, seems clear: Jesus is not solving the dilemma by carving out separate domains of human loyalty – in the end we belong to God – or as we heard in our story from Moses – God is at our centre. And it is through this perspective which we will see the world more fully.

Whatever we render unto Caesar, or to our jobs, or to the offering, we can never afford to forget this: we belong entirely to God. We may divide our budget, and our time, but whatever challenges we face, whatever insecurities overcome us, there is one thing in our perspective which must always we certain – God knows us, and it is that relationship, and that relationship alone which shapes and forms every other part of our being, and our life. For we know that God is at the core of our being and this means we are known by God who is at the heart of everything, both seen and unseen.

One of the highlights of John's welcome service was a fantastic poem, read by its author which I think in many ways sums all this up and so I think it is worth our reflection today...

I do not know God by Joy Mead from Walking Our Story Glasgow, Wild Goose Publications 2016

Amen