

Communion Service Sunday 4th October – led by Revd. Jonathan Hyde



*Arriving early, I found Jonathan already in the car park clutching what looked like the results of a good afternoon's tree pruning, which he then proceeded to decorate our pulpit with. It was the lead-in to an explanation of the **Jewish festival of Shabbat** which had concluded the day before.*

He'd brought in some willow branches from his garden, Jonathan told us, to help give a sense of a ceremony Jesus would have been very familiar with and would have observed each year. We would probably call it the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles and it looked back to an account in Leviticus where the Jewish people had been told to remember their flight from Egypt: how God had protected and led them through the desert, and how they'd built temporary shelters along the way.

Leviticus 23 connected the festival with harvest time. Beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after gathering the crops, the people were to celebrate a festival to the Lord for seven days. On the first day, they were to take branches from palms, willows, and other leafy trees, and build simple three-sided shelters with roofs that had openings left so that people could look up and see the stars. The festival was a happy occasion, and families were encouraged to spend the week sleeping in the shelter.

John 7:2–43 described Jesus in the temple during this festival and recorded how he revealed himself as the light of the world. The passage provided a helpful picture of Jesus participating in the Jewish customs of his time, customs that had shaped his life. We should recognise and embrace that heritage in our worship.

Our three readings and the accompanying addresses illustrated challenges Christians faced in today's world.

The reading from **Deuteronomy, chapter 4** offered guidance to the Jewish people on how they should follow God. It repeated many of the teachings and laws found in Exodus. The people had been with Moses, preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses would not make that journey with them, so he'd warned them to remain faithful and obey the laws God had given, reminding them of a time when they had strayed badly and been drawn into relationships that led them towards the worship of Baal.

The challenge for Christians today was how, in a country where religions are often treated as being of equal value, we expressed our conviction that there was one true God clearly and respectfully, without being misunderstood or accused of intolerance. How we affirmed our faith in God while speaking with humility and respect.

The Jewish people entering the Promised Land had faced a similar challenge when they'd encountered long-established forms of worship. Moses' instruction had been genuinely radical: When you enter the land, remain faithful to the laws God has given you. That call to faithfulness continued to speak to us: hold firmly to what God has revealed, even when surrounding beliefs are more popular. But we should also recognise our own tendency to wander and respond with humility.

The second reading was from **Romans 13**, a demanding text that many people studied in depth at theological college and which had been central to Martin Luther's thinking, profoundly influenced the Protestant Reformation. Paul had written to the church in Rome during his third missionary journey. Christians there lived under Roman rule and had faced severe persecution, particularly under Nero. Yet Paul told them to submit to the governing authorities. For a community facing punishment and bloodshed, that teaching must have been exceptionally hard to hear.

Now we were to imagine hearing the same passage in a German church in 1936 or 1937, amid Hitler's lies and the brutality of the Nazi regime. If we had been there, would we have resisted the government—or concluded that faith required us not to overthrow the established order? It could be argued that this tension helped explain why many Germans had been slow to resist. Even those who had opposed the regime, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had had to confront a profound question: when did obedience to authority cease to be faithful, and when did resistance become necessary?

People living under totalitarian regimes had repeatedly faced this dilemma. At what point did you comply, and at what point did you refuse? The argument was sometimes made that even a cruel dictatorship was preferable to complete anarchy—but that did not make the moral choice easy.

The church in Rome had faced persecution of appalling cruelty. Christians had been blamed for the fire in Rome, and the violence that followed had been merciless. Receiving a letter that said, in effect, "obey the authorities" would therefore

have been deeply challenging. With that picture in mind, we were to imagine a German congregation sitting in church under the Nazi regime. Ministers and congregations had had to decide whether to comply or to make a stand, knowing that members of the Gestapo might be present and that defiance could lead to arrest. Did you protect your congregation and guide them as best you could within the system, or did you openly resist?

For anyone whose loved ones had been imprisoned or killed, this passage must have been painfully difficult to receive. It also raised a wider question that many people ask: why does God permit such evil? (*and Jonathan will address this question at a later date*). For now, the passage invited us to consider how the Church should respond to authority when faithfulness, conscience and personal safety pulled in different directions. Jonathan wondered what persecuted congregations truly thought as they heard these words. It was part of the challenge of our faith.

Our third reading was from **Matthew 22**. The episode had taken place near the end of Jesus' ministry. He had been teaching in the temple during a busy festival period, with his disciples and many others gathered around him. The scene might have appeared calm, but hostility had been building. The Pharisees had approached Jesus with the Herodians. Their alliance was significant: they were not seeking an honest answer, but an excuse to accuse him. They'd asked, "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" Either answer had its dangers. Supporting the tax could have alienated the people; opposing it could have been treated as rebellion against Rome.

The Roman coin carried Caesar's image. Such coinage was unacceptable for temple offerings, so worshippers exchanged it for suitable currency. Yet the same people had been required to pay Roman taxes with imperial money. For faithful Jews, paying tax to an occupying power—whose culture and worship conflicted with their own—created a profound moral and religious tension.

Jesus had immediately exposed their motive: "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?" He'd then asked them to show him the coin used for the tax and when they'd identified Caesar's image, Jesus had replied: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." His answer had avoided their false choice and turned the challenge back on them.

The passage raised questions that remained difficult:

- What should we do when our taxes supported policies or activities we opposed?
- Was disagreement a justification for withholding what the law required?
- How did we honour legitimate civic duties while remaining faithful to God?

Christians had wrestled with these questions throughout history. We might object to how public money was used, but Jesus' answer called us to distinguish between our obligations to earthly authorities and our ultimate allegiance to God.

The encounter also reminded us that Jesus understood what it was to be pressured, misrepresented and confronted by hostile people. When we faced difficult situations, we could pray with confidence: he had been there, and he knew what it was like.

