

CHRISTIANS & POLITICS

(Part of Lent Series)

This is the second sermon in a Lenten series looking at how Christians engage with the world around us – last week we thought about *Christians and the Environment*, and next week we'll be reflecting on *Christians and Community*. This week it's *Christians and Politics*, which could hardly be more appropriate given the events of the past few days.

It's not an easy area to discuss, as there are so many varying political views held by Christians and others – but we shouldn't shy away from it just because it is hard.

The Bishops of the Church of England issued a letter last year, just before the General Election, called 'Who is my Neighbour?' This is what they had to say about Christians and politics:

Some people, including some in the positions of influence in the media, politics and elsewhere, claim that religion and politics cannot mix. They assert that religion belongs solely to the private sphere and must not trespass into the realm of political or economic life. Although this is often treated as a universal truth, it is a view largely confined to the modern-day European context. In previous centuries, and in most parts of the world today, it has been accepted that religious belief of its nature addresses the whole of life, private and public. It is not possible to separate the way a person perceives his or her place in the created order from their beliefs, religious or otherwise, about how the world's affairs ought to be arranged [*Who is My Neighbour?*, p. 5]

The previous Archbishop of Capetown, Desmond Tutu, put it a bit more succinctly: 'I am puzzled by which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don't mix'.

And how could it be that Christians were not involved in politics? The word comes from the Greek Πολις, meaning city, or state. Politics is about the entirety of how we live our lives together, and encompasses the economy, the justice system, community relations, and all other aspects of our life as a country. We can't escape the realm of politics, whether we

like it or not.

It might be worth reflecting on the sorts of things Jesus spoke about in his teaching, preaching and parables.

For a start, right at the beginning of his ministry, in Mark 1, Jesus says, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ [Mk 1:15]. Jesus speaks a lot about the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is his perceived threat to the powers that be which brings him in to conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem, and which leads eventually to the Cross.

The Kingdom of God, like a mustard seed, or like a woman who has lost a coin and finds it, or like a man who loses one of his 100 sheep in the wilderness and leaves the 99 to find the lost one, the Kingdom into which the tax collectors and sinners will enter first [Matt 21:28-32], the Kingdom, the arrival of which we pray for every time we say the Lord’s Prayer – ‘Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven’, the Kingdom of God which is now and not yet, which is already here but still a long way from being fully established – working towards the full establishment of that Kingdom is why we as Christians have to be involved in politics.

And Jesus gave the manifesto for that Kingdom at the beginning of his ministry, when he was in the synagogue at Nazareth, in Luke 4 [:17-21], and chose to read a passage from the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah:

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’ ... ²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

That is Jesus setting out his stall for his coming years, and it is that agenda which has impelled Christians to be engaged in politics in so many different ways and different places since then.

The Bishops in their letter – which you can find on the internet, and it is worth reading – the

Bishops say:

Christians everywhere and throughout the ages have prayed, as part of The Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven". That is why politics and the life of the Christian disciple cannot be separated. That is why the Church calls its members to play a full part in the political life of the nation and to support politicians and the government with their prayers [Ibid, p.7].

Now, you'll notice that I've not yet mentioned any of the political parties – and I'm not intending to. Urging Christians to be involved in politics is not saying that there is a certain way you should vote, or that one party or another has all of the answers. There is a group in the Palace of Westminster called 'Christians in Parliament [, which] is an All Party Parliamentary Group that exists to support Christians of all denominations and parties in their work in the Houses of Parliament'. There are Christians in all parties in the Commons and Lords, and many people of other faiths as well.

Urging Christians to be involved in politics is not about telling people which party to support, but to recognize that (a) our politicians have a difficult job to do, with many competing claims to take into account, many difficult decisions to make, many temptations to misuse the power they have, and that they need all the prayer and support we can give them; and (b) that it's not which party we are supporting that matters, but what that party is doing. As well as prayer, our most important role in politics is to see what our politicians are up to, and whether their actions are moving us closer to the Kingdom of God which Jesus preached, or further away from it.

Are the policies of a particular party directed towards the interests of a particular group of people, or are they aimed towards the full spectrum of communities which we have in this country? Are policies taking into account the needs of those least able to speak up for themselves – the young, the old, the poor, the excluded? Are policies offering support where it is needed, and yet encouraging people to grow in their own economic, and educational and social powers?

And what about the wider world? Britain still has an extraordinary place on the world stage, and considerable influence in world events. Are we using that influence for good in the

world – in Europe, in the Middle East, throughout the Commonwealth, in the wider world?
Are we working towards a better world for all of its people?

And what about other issues, such as the environment? The Industrial Revolution began here. We as a country have benefitted in the past from slavery, from the exploitation of the earth's resources, from the use of coal and oil in our power stations. What now are we doing as a nation to make that right, to protect the earth for future generations, to ensure that it survives for our children's children? Are we leading by example, and encouraging others to invest in clean energy, to clean up the seas, to protect endangered species, and so on?

There is a very understandable tendency to think that we are powerless, that we can't do anything to make a difference, that all these complicated issues are so far above our ability and understanding, that we just throw up our hands and give up.

But, actually, that's not true. There are all sorts of ways that we can make a difference. There are very small things, like buying fairly traded goods, so that the poorest in our world get a fair return for their work.

We can join one of the campaigning organisations, and learn more about the issues – Tearfund, Christian Aid, Christians Against Poverty – there are all sorts of organisations around that can help us to pray better, and to act more effectively.

Tearfund has an app called Nudge, partly designed by Craig my son, which is an easy way to see what the current issues are, and to have your say on them – I recommend it – Nudge.

The Jubilee 2000 Campaign worked in the late 90s for the cancellation of unrepayable debt in developing countries, and had remarkable success. A few years ago I was part of Christian Aid's Tax Justice Campaign, and it's very interesting to see how that is coming up the political agenda.

And we can make sure we use our vote wisely and thoughtfully – we'll have another opportunity to do that on the very important EU referendum on June 23rd.

There is a vacancy on Fordingbridge Town Council – I have been a Parish Councillor before, and it was a very interesting way to be involved in the life of the town or village, and to

make small differences which improve the lives of others – we need Christians in local politics, as well as national.

We can write to our MP if we see something going through Parliament which doesn't seem fair or right; we can sign petitions on-line; we can urge a group of people to get together to make a difference. There are lots of different ways in which we can fulfil our Christian vocation to make the world a better place.

Politics is about power. As we know, power has the tendency to corrupt, and our politicians, locally and nationally, need to be watched. They need to be prayed for, to be loved – but also to be watched! And I think is our principal role – to pray, to be alert to what is going on, and to be ready to speak or write when injustices are being done.

As Churchill famously said in the House of Commons on the 11th November 1947:

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....

Our politicians need our support, our prayers and our challenge.

And as Jesus said:

‘The Spirit of the Lord ... has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' ... ²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

Father, your Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven. AMEN.