

## St Mary's Holy Communion 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2017

### Proper 24 / Trinity 19

## 'Politics & Religion'

Isaiah 45:1-7

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

politics and religion do make for an explosive mixture! we've plenty of evidence of that at present – culture wars in the United States, conflicts in the Middle East, refugees from Myanmar, and so on; whenever the two come together it seems that both suffer: politics informed by religion becomes doctrinaire, rather than pragmatic, 'the art of the possible' as Otto von Bismarck called it; religion shaped by politics becomes partisan and exclusive, rather than open to difference

perhaps it would be best just to keep them apart – let politics prevail in public, let religion be reserved for private spirituality

Juliet and I had an interesting experience some years ago when teaching English to Kenyan and Sudanese theology students; there was much debate at the time about a new constitution for Kenya, so we asked our students to write a short essay on, 'Should Christians be involved in politics?'

to our surprise – though on reflection, it was perhaps logical – there was a clear divide between the Kenyans, who wrote: 'no, religion is a private matter, politics is a dirty business, don't get involved!'; and the Sudanese, who wrote: 'yes, we must play our part and make our voices heard, so that right decisions are made'

the Sudanese were coming towards the end of more than 20 years of violent civil war, that eventually led to the formation of South Sudan as a separate country; for them, politics was not an option for those who like that kind of thing, but a matter of life and death

for the Kenyans, perhaps as a legacy of the British colonial rule that had brought them Christianity in the first place, it seemed safer just to keep your head down and not stir up trouble

which way would we go in thinking about politics in this country now? should we get involved? does our faith have anything to say about Brexit, or our policy in the Middle East? is it ok for bishops to speak out on welfare payments or prison reform, or should they keep their mouths shut? conversely, can politicians have anything to say to us, that we might need to hear?

back in October 2014, the last time we had today's Bible readings, we invited our MP, Fiona Mactaggart, to speak here at St Mary's about Climate Change, and what her party was doing about it; this was a 'respectable' initiative, proposed by Christian Aid (not just the vicar on his hobby-horse!), but it had a mixed reception: some asked me, why have a non-Christian speaker at our main act of worship? what could she offer that was pertinent to our concerns?

in Isaiah 45, God does not appear to be so picky about who he uses; he even calls the non-believing King Cyrus of Persia his 'Anointed', his 'Messiah', the one chosen to fulfil his purpose of bringing back the Jewish exiles to their homeland:

'I call you by your name, I arm you, I will go before you, I will give you the treasures of darkness', says the prophet to Cyrus, 'though you do not know me'

you can read the full story in the book of Ezra, and it appears there that, though he's not a Jew and doesn't worship the true God, Cyrus is open to understand and to do the right thing, and so to carry out God's will

is that something we can imagine, and pray for, for our politicians, whether Christians or not? the default attitude to political leaders in this country is, sadly, one of cynicism – they are either fools or villains, or both, and either way you can't trust them an inch

at Shola's licencing on Monday we had guests from the community, including the Mayor of Slough and a local councillor; are we just paying lip-service to politics there, or do we really believe that God's kingdom can be advanced by a partnership between politics and religion?

let's see what Jesus has to say on the matter: there's no doubt that his teaching was understood in his time to be deeply political, a challenge to authority that led inexorably to his own death; last week's parable of the Wedding Banquet anticipated the destruction of Jerusalem, by Roman legions, as a result of the Jews' rejection of Jesus; that was a highly political and a highly unpopular message

so today an unlikely pairing, an unholy alliance of political and religious factions forms, to try to trap Jesus: the Pharisees represent a return to theocracy, the rule of Jewish law; the Herodians take sides with their puppet king, and the overwhelming might of Rome; both feel threatened by Jesus so they conspire together

after buttering him up with insincere praise of his honesty and incorruptibility, they throw out their test question: 'is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'; which trumps the other – religion (don't pay that evil, Gentile tax), or politics (that's where the power lies, so better pay up)?

Jesus' answer flummoxed them then, and has been cause for intense debate ever since; what on earth did he mean, 'give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'?

this year we are marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Reformation, following the posting of Martin Luther's 95 Theses on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517 – see *October Around Langley*

here was a moment where politics and religion collided violently, with wars and social upheavals whose echoes continue to the present day; but how did Luther himself interpret these words of Jesus?

Luther developed a doctrine of separation between 'civil' righteousness, and 'spiritual' righteousness; we must play our part in civic and national life, paying our taxes, obeying the law, and so on; but our religious life functions separately, and in a quite different way, as it depends of God's grace, and not on obedience to law

I can feel a Venn diagram coming over me here: two circles, separate from each other, to represent the distinct realms of politics and religion, with no overlap between them: 'give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's', on this side, and 'to God the things that God's', on the other

I think that's the wrong diagram; instead, locate the 'politics' circle inside the 'religion' circle, as a subset: yes, we are to 'give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's'; we are to pay our taxes, but has God somehow lost them as a result?

no! HMRC belongs as much to God as do our bank accounts, and it's as much part of the potential for his kingdom as we are!

like King Cyrus, whether they recognise it or not, our rulers all have their place within that larger picture in which all things belong to God, and all can be used to fulfil his ultimate purpose; 'give to God the things that God's'? what is God's? everything!

this incident of the coin with Caesar's head on it comes at the end of a long series of parables, stories that invite us to think differently about ourselves, and about God

it doesn't make sense to treat this one statement of Jesus as suddenly, at last, a literal utterance, that makes perfect, direct sense; Jesus is rather using this coin as a kind of parable, a symbol that highlights deep questions of allegiance; the coin stands for all the civic demands, and all the messiness of the real world; we have to live with that, but it's all *within* not *separate from* our commitment to doing things God's way; it's all *within* not *separate from* a vision of the kingdom that is coming

so our engagement with politics becomes a necessary part of our Christian faith and discipleship; we are to write to our MP and lobby our councillors out of concern for the common good; we are to believe – whatever our party preference – that the Mayor of Slough, or Teresa May, or even Donald Trump, can be instruments of God's will; we need to pray and act in accord with that conviction

as a Parish over the coming months we are going to reflect more deeply on the Bishop of Oxford's 3 Cs: how we are called to be Christ-like, by becoming more *Contemplative*, more *Compassionate* and more *Courageous*

those 3 Cs may be costly, as we seek to express them within the realities of our world and its politics – they cost Jesus his life, and the lives of many martyrs since

but what are not options for us in relation to politics are attitudes of complacency or indifference, cynicism or despair! may we rather engage in our world with a compassion and a courage that are deeply rooted in contemplation, in an understanding of who God is, and what he calls us to do in his name