

8th December 2019 - Advent 2

It was again a privilege to host the General Election Hustings here on Wednesday. All sorts of questions were submitted, most of which couldn't be touched on for lack of time.

The sharp rise in homelessness and the 135,000 or so children who'll spend Christmas in temporary accommodation, according to Shelter. The hollowing-out of the welfare state. The piecemeal sale of the NHS, the desperate shortage of staff, the near collapse of mental health services. The integrity, or lack of it, amongst some leading politicians. The strain under which schools are operating. The pressures on our unwritten constitution. The suspected influence of Russia over politicians and our electoral system. Climate change. And so on. We could have kept the questions coming for an entire day.

But one question we could have had was absent. It's the one all Christian people are asked to answer honestly and prayerfully, searching the depths of their heart, at this and every election.

How would Jesus vote?

We hear the claims and counter-claims of politicians. We recognise some of the lies for what they are, and try to discern who to trust, who speaks the truth. We look at the headlines and ask why this is reported as news and something else more important isn't; we wonder whether the adverts we see and the rumours we hear are true, or whether we're being manipulated yet again.

How would Jesus vote? What are our priorities, and how are they shaped and informed by our faith? What does it mean at election time to pray for the coming of God's kingdom?

No doubt some will ask whether it's right to raise this subject here. Do religion and politics mix? The Bible says yes, undoubtedly; we'll look at some of that in a moment. The Church says yes, too.

Karl Barth, a prominent 20th-century theologian, spoke of preaching with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

The Holy Roman Empire, and the monarchy in our own land, were shaped by a theology of the ruler as a servant of Christ and of the people - brought most sharply into focus as the monarch washed the feet of the poor every Maundy Thursday.

The origins of the Labour movement, and of trades unions, lie in the Methodist Church: challenging the powerful and oppressive and speaking out for the poor.

The Welfare State, which has done so much good for all of us in this country since the 1940s, has its theological foundations in the writings of William Temple, a

wartime Archbishop of Canterbury; a scholar who drew deeply on the faith and traditions of the Church and asked how they relate to a modern, just and equitable society.

None of these outworkings of faith is perfect; all of them has been compromised in some way - that's human nature; but all of them express something profound about the Christian striving to seek the kingdom of God in and through the life of the world.

And if we don't strive for what is right, if society isn't shaped by the outworking of our faith, it will be shaped by other ideologies and other values. Virtue is not the default condition of human nature. Secularism is not some neutral zone where goodness can flourish, freed from the shackles of religion. Nor does it automatically hold to the Judaeo-Christian values of truth, or justice, or the sanctity of every person made in the image of God. It's open to any ideology or value which can sell itself persuasively - or pull the wool over the eyes of voters. Personal and corporate greed and ambition, unchecked by moral scruples or historic conventions, is oppressive and destructive. What do we hope for? What do we vote for? Where does it lead us as a nation? And... how would Jesus vote?

The Prophets sought justice and righteousness. They made deeply political pronouncements in the face of greedy, tyrannical rulers. Our first reading this morning foretells the shoot arising from the stump of Jesse: that is, the descendant of Jesse, Jesus himself, who would bring hope and change. 'With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.' (Judge, in this context, isn't about condemnation; it's about leadership, or government, just as the rulers of Israel were once called judges.)

Some of the Psalms are scathing about the powerful who are unjust. Others lament the hardship suffered by the vulnerable. This morning's Psalm strikes a note of hope as it looks forward to the coming of Jesus: 'He shall defend the needy, rescue the poor, crush the oppressor.' Social justice is a hallmark of the presence of Jesus.

And now, in the Gospel reading, his coming is at last announced. 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.'

It's not too late to repent. But repentance is necessary, and urgent. There are no excuses. For anyone. You can't follow Jesus without repentance.

Repentance. Turning to face another way. Recognising the reality of sin in our lives, recognising our contribution to the ills of the world, wanting to say sorry and make amends. And yes, learning to love our neighbour as ourself.

'We have Abraham as our ancestor.' We have privilege. We have an inheritance. We've always done it this way, we're respectable, we're C of E. (I speak to myself as well as to you; the Gospel addresses us all.)

'God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.'

What matters is not inheritance or privilege, but a humble heart before God which acknowledges its sin; a heart which both longs and tries to do better by God's grace, and above all to love. There is no other route to grace and salvation.

Repentance is really trendy amongst many young people today. They don't call it that. But they do recognise the unsustainability of our lives, and the damage we're inflicting on our planet and on one another, and they want to live differently. Eat less meat. Use less fuel. Buy less stuff. Recycle and upcycle as if the world depended on it - because it does. True repentance leads to practical action, to a different and better way of life. Greta Thunberg, like her or loath her, is a prophet calling us all to repent.

Repentance in the light of the coming Kingdom of Heaven - and its king - demands all this and more. The 'more' which it demands is one of the constants of the living Church's witness: that social justice is a vital expression of our faith; that truth, righteousness and equity are vital for society to flourish; that the measure of our obedience to God is our treatment of the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the outcast, the foreigner: the very people who have been attacked by parts of our media over recent years.

When Jesus was still in the womb, his mother gave a great song of praise to God in deeply political terms. We use it daily at Evening Prayer, and call it the Magnificat. 'He has scattered the proud...cast down the mighty...lifted up the lowly...filled the hungry with good things.' These words shape the Church.

When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah uttered another great song of praise. We use it daily at Morning Prayer, and call it the Benedictus. 'In the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.' These words, too, speak of the work of Jesus, which must be the work of all Christian people.

When Jesus commenced his public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, he did so with an address so explosive, his listeners tried to kill him. It was again a deeply political manifesto: Good news to the poor. Freedom for captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. Freedom for the oppressed. He was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Then he said 'Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

How would Jesus vote?

In the words of the Bishop of Liverpool: "If you're a Christian, then (after praying, reading and learning,) cast your vote in the way that you believe will help the poorest most."

Or in the words of Jesus, 'Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness.'