

A NEW WORD FOR AN OLD LABOUR

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TO MANY, THERE IS NO OBVIOUS OR DIRECT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PULPIT AND POLITICS. HOWEVER, IT IS IMPERATIVE TO ASK WHAT IS THE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PREACHED WORD?

To answer this question we must understand both the times we live in and what is required of the preacher in these times. This is to say, we must delineate the responsibilities and purpose of politics as well as the purpose and responsibility of preaching to politics.

Today, saying politics has a purpose is no longer stating the obvious. The libertarian ideology, in both its social and economic forms, denies any wider purpose to politics other than the promotion of individual liberty and freedom for the market. In effect, this denies politics any purpose at all. Politics ceases to have any creative possibilities and becomes a wholly destructive endeavour; that is, the task of the politician is the removal of social and political boundaries, traditions and constraints that limit autonomous choice and "free" trade. The logical conclusion of such a view must be the eventual withering away of political authority, whence choice and market form some self-constituting entity. This is patently absurd. Even in their darkest formulations of the role of political authority Christians have never envisaged politics as a wholly destructive endeavour. Even if the ruler's sole task is to bear the sword and enforce order, it still constitutes a positive purpose. Our preaching must help the faithful resist a vision of politics and the role of political authority as purposeless and futile.

Not only does politics serve a purpose, but the purpose it serves is a moral one. There are those for whom talk of politics and morality in the same breath is an invitation to cynical sneers. On the political right, such sneers come from those who call themselves "realists", who take Machiavelli as their guide, and who see might as right. On the left, such sneers come from those who see all forms of power as intrinsically oppressive and all moral claims as masks concealing plays for power. But the Christian cannot keep company with either the overly suspicious or the unnecessarily callous. Christ's life and resurrection affirm and establish the possibility of moral action in every realm of life, including that of statecraft. Our preaching must help the faithful discern the moral purposes of politics and resist those who deny such a possibility.

Politics has a purpose and is moral, but this does not mean that political authority has unlimited possibilities. After Christ politics should be a modest endeavour. The horrific excesses of various nineteenth- and twentieth-

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► century political programmes were born out of the messianic and utopian pretensions for what the state could craft. Colonial powers that suppressed and destroyed ancient cultures in order to “civilise” them, nationalist tyrannies that sought to purify the master race by human sacrifice, and Communist regimes that murdered millions in order to bring heaven on earth are all examples of such pretensions. The book of Revelation depicts this hydra-headed beast with terrible clarity. Reflecting on its portrayal of political authority in rebellion against its Sovereign and Judge – Jesus Christ – trains us to be suspicious of over-ambitious political claims. Our preaching must help the faithful discern the modest purposes of politics and resist those who seek salvation and the “healing of the nations” through political endeavour.

As well as the responsibility of the ruler, our preaching must encompass the responsibilities of the Christian as a British subject. We live in an age when most people are disenchanted with politics and politicians. For example, today, radical protest is directed toward the economic realm, whereas the fervour of 1960s student radicals was directed toward the realm of politics. Another indicator of this abandonment of politics to politicians is that the numbers of people voting is declining in each election. The reasons for this shift are manifold and complex and there is not the space to analyse them here. However, we can ask what should be the proper response of Christians? We are counselled in Ephesians 4 to “no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine”, but neither are we to be fooled “by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming”. On the one hand, we should be suspicious of simply following the *zeitgeist* and abandoning politics, but, on the other hand, we should not simply join parties, vote, lobby and campaign just because these things are possible. Instead, “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ”. What does this mean in relation to politics today? How does this “way you learned Christ”, which Paul speaks of, relate to our political responsibilities as British subjects?

It is a vital task of preaching to address these questions in the light of Scripture. The first task of the preacher in this respect is to help people understand what it means to be the Church. In learning what it means to be brothers and sisters of the household of God and citizens of the kingdom of God, we can properly understand what it means to seek the welfare of the

United Kingdom. Schooling in Christian discipleship enables us to form the kind of judgement that can make wise and good political choices. We do not come to see what is wise and just merely by looking. We must develop the necessary disciplines, virtues and judgement through initiation and participation in that community which attempts to be faithful to the story of God. Thus, the primary political task of the preacher is to help Christians know what it is to be faithful and to help them rightly envision the world.

Building up the kind of community that is “rooted and built up in [Christ] and established in the faith” (Col. 2.7) is to enable the Church to witness to the kingdom of God. Truthful witness, founded on the gospel, is inevitably political. For in proclaiming that Christ is Lord, we say that Caesar’s reign is limited and under judgement. In other words, the Church in faithfully being the Church calls Caesar to be moral and modest. However, truthful witness means the Church, as Church (as distinct from individual Christians), cannot be aligned with one particular party or policy. It can only be aligned with Christ and no one political party or policy can claim a monopoly on such alignment.

Politics is a secular activity; this is to say, it is of this age and not of the age to come. To claim any party or policy as the only possible option for Christians is to claim far too much. It teeters on the edge of the kind of messianic pretensions that proved so disastrous in the last century. One might claim that only certain political goods and goals are valid for Christians to seek. But there can be no single definably “Christian” way or means of achieving these. To say otherwise is to stand against Paul in the debate over circumcision. No earthly mark may be the cause of division in the body of Christ. “For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens of the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” Thus,

preaching must help the faithful discern what it means to be faithful, but resist the temptation to prescribe what faithfulness means in terms of one particular political programme.

Finally, preaching itself is a political act. In an age when public speech, from advertising to political rhetoric, is economical with the truth, preaching maintains the possibility of truthful public speech. The preached word is a Pentecostal word, because it is the word that builds up the community and is for the community. It is thus truly free speech, speech that is the gift of God for the good of others. Preaching conflicts directly with contemporary political speech, which assumes all are equal (all voices count the same as opposed to some having wisdom and others listening) and competitive (instead of seeking the truth together, truth is supposed to emerge from everyone fighting to have their say; thus parliament ceases to be a place of common deliberation and becomes instead a joust between competing interests). The practice of preaching holds open the possibility of truthful and free speech and fosters a people who expect such speech from their rulers and who will denounce false speech that aims to conceal and serve itself.

Preaching the Word of God is one of the foremost and most vital political tasks. However, it must arouse neither the expectation of heaven on earth, nor hopelessness abounding; instead, preaching should envision the faithful to seek a good enough and civil society characterised by just generosity as they wait patiently for the full disclosure of God's kingdom.