

## **RELIGION AND POLITICS Gen 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-end Mark 1:9-15**

### **Introduction**

This week there has been a minor storm in public opinion in response to the Anglican Bishop's pastoral letter about the General Election. I listened to part of a Radio 2 phone-in which seemed to generate more heat than light. Some were complaining about the bishops sticking their noses into either private choice or public politics. Others were saying that religion and politics shouldn't mix. Yet others were saying that the CofE should make sure its own house is in order before criticizing others. I wonder where you stand on this issue and what you thought about the controversy. Of course, we are a mixed congregation and non-Anglicans amongst us might say that either bishops shouldn't be in the House of Lords anyway, or that they get along in their own denomination quite happily without bishops to show them the way! The part of the programme I happened to hear didn't tackle the whole question of what is meant by "religion" or "politics" in the first place. Neither did it ask exactly what the bishops' letter was all about. As I understand it, the CofE leadership was asking some searching questions both of the electorate and politicians - questions which all of us should seriously think about and urging us to use our vote wisely. (Even to use our vote in the first place rather than be complacent as our universal suffrage is a hard won fruit of democracy.)

### **The Rainbow and Baptism**

Has any of this got anything to do with our Bible readings today and should we be thinking about politics and the General Election in church anyway? Well, I believe we should and I believe our Bible has a lot to say about public affairs and how we organize human society. Let me try and throw some light onto the subject to help us think a bit more clearly about it and perhaps have a response if we get into a debate about it with folks outside the Church.

One of the best known Bible stories is about Noah's Ark. But perhaps we stop at a child's level, just thinking about all the animals going into the big boat, surviving the flood and then coming out to a beautiful rainbow in the sky. What is it all about, though? Peter found some meaning in it when he talks about baptism. He saw a connection between the waters of the flood and the water of baptism. Just as God saved Noah, his family and the animals by bringing them through the Flood in the Ark, so God provides a way for us to be saved through the water of baptism. It is not baptism itself which saves us, though - baptism is a "sign and seal" of our faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism is a new version of the rainbow - a sign of the New Covenant. Whereas the rainbow is a reminder that God promised never to send a Flood again, baptism reminds us of the salvation that we can have through Christ. Both remind us of the love and mercy of God.

## **Every Living Creature**

The original Bible story of the ark and the rainbow in Genesis tells us that God made a promise to every living creature - the covenant between God and the earth. If we believe in this same God, then our faith, our religion, leads us to see that the whole earth and the life of every creature has plenty to do with God. The way we live on earth and the arrangements humans make for organizing life on earth is also part of what God is interested in. If we believe that God is concerned with the welfare of every living thing, then as responsible people of faith, how we live our whole lives and how we act responsibly towards all the animals and plants in our world is also part of our faith. A great deal of how we organize our life on earth is to do with politics, whether we like it or not. So when people say religion and politics don't mix I wonder what they mean by either of these terms. I suspect that they hold a rather reduced meaning to each of the words which is why they don't overlap in their opinion. By "religion" they perhaps mean purely saying prayers, worshipping in a church or other holy place, maybe trying to live a good life. That way of seeing religion has developed as the practice of faith has grown more and more a matter private life. We keep our beliefs to ourselves and because everyone is entitled to their own view we don't question each other openly. What was once public religion has become private piety. By "politics" I suspect is meant just party politics. I am aware that I might be misrepresenting such opinions, but I am trying to understand where such comments come from. I agree, and I'm pretty sure the bishops agree, that the Church has no business telling people which political party they are to vote for. But the bishop's appeal to the voting public was to say "try and be a bit more critical about the values which are being offered for your choice". What values do we want our society to live by? Their challenge to politicians is also to reassess the values which they live by. Is that still mixing religion and politics in an unacceptable way? Perhaps it is!

## **Struggle in the Wilderness**

Jesus was baptised (a very religious thing) and then was kicked out by the Holy Spirit to spend 40 days in the wilderness. Mark says, along with the other gospel writers, that Jesus was tempted by Satan. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't tell us about the different kinds of temptations. We can interpret this story in different ways and taking it literally is just one way of understand what happened. For my money what means quite a lot for me is that Jesus was preparing for his mission. Having been baptised and blessed with the Holy Spirit for the mission, he then had to spend a period working out how he was to fulfill his mission. Just as the children of Israel had to spend 40 years in the wilderness learning how to be God's people when they entered the Promised Land, so Jesus prepared himself in the wilderness. How was he going to bring God's new covenant into the world? How was he going to express God's love and care for every living creature? If you like, what was his mission

statement or his job description going to look like? Matthew and Luke's details about the temptations are a way of describing the choices that Jesus faced: should he seek to be a sensation (the way of fame); should he lead a revolution (the way of world power); should he seek only his own good (the way of self-satisfaction)? Jesus rejects all of these solutions. The only way is of humility, of love and of sacrifice. Instead of a rainbow there was to be the cross as a sign of the new covenant between God and the earth. But when Jesus began his ministry, he came and began to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near. A kingdom is a realm, a gathering of values whereby people live and lead an orderly life which brings good to every living creature. The Kingdom Jesus proclaimed was not "of this world", but it had demands of the life of this world, and it addressed the false and destructive values whereby this world lives. Many of those false and destructive values have a political side to them. The policies which a government adopts and makes into the law are drawn from moral values. Moral values have everything to do with religion. So when I want to live by the command of Jesus, "love your neighbour as yourself" or "do to others as you would be done by", it is not a merely private and personal matter. Loving my neighbour includes making sure that they live in a just, equal and free society. Does that not involve making political decisions including using my vote in a free democracy and the choice I make about which party to vote for? In other words, the religious choices I make are also political choices. I cannot divide the two unless I live a schizophrenic or at least an unthinking life!

### **Working it out**

Jesus had to work out his mission step by step. Once he had established his basic approach in the wilderness, he then had to apply this in real life situations. So his ministry included healing the sick, teaching about God, challenging those in authority, championing the poor and giving renewed hope to the oppressed. He did all this without seeking worldly power. But we, as his followers, live in the real world and we have to make some basic decisions about how we live out our faith step by step. In fact, Christians have tried different ways of working it out down the centuries. There are three basic choices or ways in which Christians have sought to resolve the issue of how their faith relates to the world. There are two opposite extremes and a mid-way between the two. One extreme is to say that Christ and culture do not mix at all. Whilst we have to live in this world, we try to be as little involved with it as possible. Examples are Jehovah's Witnesses or the Amish of USA. The other extreme is to say the Kingdom of God and good society are more or less the same. We strive for a good society and that is equivalent to God's realm. An example of this would be something like the social gospel. Between these two extremes are various kinds of mid-way between the two. Anglicanism is an example of saying that although Christ and culture are distinct from each other, nevertheless we try to work for the values of the

Kingdom in the nitty gritty of real life. The CofE is an established or state church because of this conviction. So, because of the way history has developed the British Constitution, for the time being bishops sit in the House of Lords - they fulfil an advisory role - reminding the nation of Christian values. Whilst there are good arguments for the complete separation of Church and State, that is a constitutional matter and a nation should only change its constitution after a proper referendum of all its citizens.

## **Conclusion**

I hope I have shown that religion and politics, when thought about carefully, do have a great deal to do with each other. They may live and act in a way that takes our responsibility towards others seriously and that includes voting according to a Christian conscience. It is to live under both the rainbow ark and the sign of the cross - both signs which stand over the whole earth and are to do with every living thing for whom God cares.

