

GENERAL ELECTION 2010 - A THEOLOGY

Christianity believes fundamentally in incarnation – it believes that God has become intricately involved with the world and its issues through the life of Jesus the Son of God. Incarnation means, in other words, God is down to earth.

The Good News is that God's grace is changing the world so that it might conform to God's reign of justice, peace, love and mercy. The Church community therefore has the responsibility to work alongside that divine grace and so be in the forefront of the business of, as the bible has it, "turning the world upside down" because of God's hopes and plans for it. The Christian life of witness must therefore have this same mark, and engage the thorny issues and complex challenges of life together on this planet and turn it upside down – that is, the Christian life must be politically engaged. Little wonder that the widely accepted 'Five Marks of Mission' describes one element of mission as "transforming the unjust structures of society". So the upcoming General Election might be seen as nothing less than a mission challenge.

Let's look together at the earliest pages of the Bible, for whilst science helps us discern how creation may have happened, the book of Genesis goes much deeper and tells us that the meaning of creation is that God brings order out of chaos, society out of anarchy – and what's more that we have a duty laid upon us by God to work with the grain of that creation and to be stewards of it. A steward is one who tends, one who cares for and ministers, and the Book of Genesis tells us that we are here to be stewards of all creation and to minister to one another. Now this term 'minister' is the same word quite rightly taken by the leaders of government – ministers – because they too have this same mandate, to be servants and stewards in the service of the people in the society they serve. So politicians and the Church share in many respects this duty of care for the society we share, and indeed the Church must encourage vocations to the political life – that we should minister together in this way, caring for the whole of God's creation, and especially for the human beings within it.

Genesis also tells us that God creates us 'in his own image'. So any lack of respect and care for one another in society is therefore an affront to the image of God that is in us, and must be challenged and sorted out. The quest for Christians is therefore to seek out those situations where the image of God in our fellows is not being respected or where that image is marred, and to do something about it. This is why the prophets, and Jesus too, condemn those who use power or privilege to take advantage of the underprivileged, for that very action mars the image of God in those being oppressed, and indeed mars the image of God in the oppressor.

Now, the Church talks a lot about this in its prayers and in its teachings but the Bible goes further. The Bible does not just talk of principles of stewardship and care for God's image in us and in others – as wonderful as those principles are – but consistently connects those principles with concrete behaviour. It sets out specific means of redressing wrongs rather than merely rehearsing a list of abstract notions about it. The most obvious example is the ten commandments – and this because, as Jesus puts it, "by their fruits you shall know them." Again, in Matt 25:32ff, the parable of the sheep and the goats, the right relationship with God is equated with concrete acts of compassion and justice towards the less fortunate. The passage asks us, when did we last clothe the naked, feed the hungry or visit the local prison – it does not just talk about that being a nice 'idea'. So the Bible is calling for us to engage with these issues, not just to think or talk about it.

We might note too that some people try to argue that whilst the Bible is concerned that we care for individuals, the Bible does not spell out that we should engage in

politics, first because that is not so much about individuals as groups and the wider society, and second, we should rather keep ourselves pure, and politics may corrupt us. But look again at the Book of Genesis. God creates the individual – ‘Adam’ – but it’s not long before Adam is pestering God for companionship. He could not stand to be alone because God has made him a human being for companionship – a social being. In the Book of Exodus, Moses builds a society – not simply a person for God but a ‘People of God’. Similarly, Jesus gathers his discipleship community – the new Israel – and tells them that, when two or three are gathered – the godly revolution is on. God certainly does care about individuals, but the Bible tells us even more about the building of godly communities. Because we are children of the same heavenly Father we are brothers and sisters on the earth and so we seek not just the good of one, nor even some, but we Christians seek what has become known as the ‘Common Good’ – the good of all and every one of God’s children.

Any arrangement in society that favours the rich over the poor or the strong over the weak is in violation of the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Beatitudes of Jesus. Any such exploitative arrangements are in opposition to a biblical understanding of the Common Good and our duty as Christians. From the Genesis mandate and through to the vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, we are exhorted to work to change such unjust systems.

Seeking the Common Good, finding structural ways of loving our neighbours, is otherwise known as politics. Of course, the world of politics may not appeal to all of us, but we all have that mandate upon to engage it in some way or other from the moment in our baptism when the sign of the cross is made upon our forehead and those words are spoken by the minister – “do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified” – in other words to get our hands dirty – “and fight valiantly” against all such evil and sin. To risk ourselves in the battle for the Kingdom of God.

In the end, we must ask ourselves the simple question: Am I happy with Britain today? If I feel that this society of ours conforms in every respect to my vision of the Kingdom of God then I might try to convince myself that there is indeed no need for politics. But if I feel that mandate upon me to change the world, to turn it upside down so that it more readily conforms to the values of God’s Kingdom, then engagement in politics, at least as a committed and informed voter, is my duty and the duty of us all.

And when it comes to determining how to vote we should not simply apply the usual criterion of ‘what policies are in my own best interest?’ but ask rather, ‘what policies offer most opportunity for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven?’ For those who have time it is therefore well worth while to submit each policy on offer to the scrutiny of a theological analysis rather than merely apply the secular criteria of utility or expediency. One way of getting help with this is to surf the web for theological reviews of specific policies*. However you do it, make sure that the way you vote is determined by a prayerful and Christian perspective. Play your part in God’s mission to ‘transform the unjust structures of society’ that they may more conform to the Divine will for this wonderful world God has created.

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Made available to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland for download, February 2010

* Or see Bishop Laurie Green’s book *‘Let’s Do Theology’* which explains how to take a particular issue or concern and apply biblical and theological analysis to it. Revised updated edition: Mowbray/Continuum, 2009