

God's politics (Psalm 24, Deut 10:12-22, Matthew 5:43-48)

You may recall famous quote from Tony Blair's enforcer Alistair Campbell a few years ago. Tony Blair, whatever you think of him, had a very real faith – he kept a well-thumbed bible by his bedside. Worried that Blair's faith was becoming too overt, he famously interrupted a journalist's question which was about to be asked on that theme with the assertion: 'We don't do God.'

But *we* might ask the question today in reverse: does *God* do politics? Does He care? And if *He* does, how do *we* care? How do we relate what we believe to politics? Typically, we might naturally connect it when issues of personal morality are being discussed by government. We may have a view when the government passes laws about sexuality or abortion or indeed freedom of religion. But is it more than that? Does it affect how we vote? Whether we join a political party? Does God have a view on how society should be organised? On things like the environment, or prisons or the NHS or the welfare state? Or does He just let us get on with it?

That's theme for today. But it's an age-old question. Church and state have had an uneasy relationship since the early days of the Christian faith. The early church Father Tertullian objected to state intervention in church affairs by dismissing the idea altogether: 'what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' He meant that the state should butt out of church decisions, but many people assume it to be the other way round.

Margaret Thatcher, another controversial modern leader who also had a very sincere faith, got angry with Archbishop Robert Runcie numerous times for interfering (as she saw it) in politics. For example, when he prayed for the Argentinian dead as well as the British after the Falklands war in 1982, or the miners' strike in 1984, and most notably of all, after his Faith in the City report of 1985, which her friend Norman Tebbit dismissed as 'pure Marxist theology.' In other words, the church has no business engaging with political debates.

We may also be put off by events in the US, where, far from faith being separated from politics, there is often no distinction at all. It often appears that faith and politics are almost the same thing. So even Donald Trump can claim to be a Christian, whilst recently saying in a public debate that he's never asked for forgiveness for anything. (Do the math, Donald.)

So, many of us are confused. And of course society generally prefers it if we keep our faith private. Keep what you believe in your homes and religious buildings, but don't bring it into the public realm. And it just seems easier to buy into that, doesn't it? **So we work on the assumption that faith and politics don't mix** – faith affects personal issues but not how we organise society.

I want to start by saying today that this is 100%.... wrong! For all that we might get it wrong, or come to different conclusions (and I'll return to that later), **faith has every bit as much relevance to politics as to anything else that affects us as human beings.** The word politics comes from the Greek word for 'city' – basically it's anything to do with how we organise human society. Which includes *us*, with our faith and our vision for how we think that society should be organised. But I want to suggest two further fundamental reasons why what we believe is profoundly relevant to politics at every level.

First, the whole earth is God's – READ Psalm 24:1 – not just homes owned by Christians or church land, but everywhere, including land about to be used for new estates, MK Council offices, and Palace of Westminster. In other words, nowhere on earth where Jesus can't say 'this is mine'. Faith relates to everything – politics included.

Seen at heart of our faith – think about Lord's Prayer: not just your kingdom come but 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Automatically involves politics – part of how God's will is done (or not) on earth. Other people may not agree with that, but it is what it is. And it was very interesting that even the Guardian admitted in a recent editorial that without the underpinning of the Christian faith in our society, it is hard currently to see an alternative vision offering any solid basis for human flourishing. There's nothing else – and we know why: *the whole earth is God's*.

Second: earthly leadership is God's idea – He invented it. God told Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 not just to multiply but to rule over the earth. If you like, human leadership is a partial extension of God's own authority. We might mess it up and abuse that power, but fundamentally, the earthly leader is there to do God's will, even those leaders not connected with church. So of course who our leaders are, and how they lead, matters.

So faith is intimately connected with politics. You take your faith into the ballot box.

Major decision coming up this week: EU referendum. Probably most important vote for a long time. Not here to tell you *how* to vote – but what I want to do today is give you a framework for how you might make your vote. Because voting is a spiritual thing – by which I mean, it is part of our faith.

And if the whole earth is God's and human leaders are meant to do God's will, that means that our primary question when it comes to how we vote is not 'what best fits my personal interest' or even 'what fits the UK's interest', but what fits God's interest?

How might we answer that question? Let's look at the 3 major areas on which this election is being fought:

- Governance – do we want to have the EU governing us alongside our national government?
- Economy – which decision will help us to be more prosperous as a nation?
- Immigration – should we allow as many people to come and live here as we do now?

What does God say about each? Actually quite a lot, let's look at each very briefly in turn. About 2 mins on each – if nothing else, might help you to go away and research some more before Thursday:

Governance – what does the bible say about government? The short answer is: very little about the model of government and a lot about the way to govern. Bear in mind that at the time of the NT, most of the known world was ruled by an empire, and democracy had only been tried at a limited level in Ancient Greece. Basically, there weren't many options on the table. But the point is, the bible doesn't care that much *who* governs you, but *how* they govern.

Will they provide justice, care for the poor and vulnerable, welcome the stranger, do their best to ensure prosperity for all? Will they do some other things too, like allow enough time off so people can rest and worship God, and in fact will they allow people freely to worship the authority which is higher than them?

30 seconds on one popular idea doing the rounds in some Christian circles. Is the EU 'Babylon the Great' in Revelation? My answer is: the image of Babylon in Revelation describes every form of human government throughout history which does not recognise the Lordship of Christ. So it would be better to ask: does the UK government recognise the Lordship of Christ more than the EU government, or not?

So basically on this issue: it's a free choice. Neither the UK government nor the EU government is intrinsically a more godly *system* of government. We can make our choice to Leave or Remain based instead on which government offers the greatest commitment to a just and godly society.

Economy – what does the bible say about this? Well, basically 2 things: first, there are more important things than money. Human flourishing exists on many levels, the most important of which is **relationships**. Much better to focus on whether Remaining or Leaving the EU will foster the most benefit to our relationships, at every level – personally, within communities, as well as across nations. That's a hard question, but it's a different one to the ones which most of the campaigners are asking.

Secondly, material prosperity is one outcome of living rightly before God. This is what God says again and again to the Israelites isn't it? Put me first and I'll take care of the rest. If you seek material prosperity as an end in itself it'll destroy you; if you seek me, I'll bless you with prosperity as well.

So again, it's a free choice to Remain or Leave. But personally I think it's the least important issue, because generally the bible suggests that we're far too obsessed with money anyway. Far better to ask which form of governance will allow healthy relationships to flourish at all levels.

Finally, immigration. Now here the bible does have more to say, and many of us may not want to hear this: God is pretty clear in the bible that we are to love the stranger in our lands. Look at what the Lord says via Moses in Deuteronomy 10: READ v17-19. There's no caveat here: basically it's exactly what Jesus means when he says 'do to others as you would like them to do to you.' Israel knew what it was to be like to be treated badly in another country. If we found ourselves in a similar situation how would we like to be treated?

Now what Moses is talking about is primarily those already living in the land, it doesn't mention new people arriving – so if you want a get out, you could argue that it's not relevant to immigration per se. But I would encourage you to reflect as to whether God would say something different about new arrivals as existing residents. There's something to ponder...

In the end, I want to be clear that this is not a clincher for the Remain group. In a big decision like this, it's likely that you'll go through the issues and one side will not have won the argument on every one. You'll have to weigh up and decide on balance. You may have to prioritise issues so that you vote for the side which looks better for the most important issues.

But as I close 3 simple thoughts to leave you with:

- **Do vote** – not because it's your secular duty but because it's your Christian duty to do so
- **Don't decide on a single issue.** Try to weigh up whole thing – the whole earth is God's.
- Finally, **try to decide which group offers the best vision of the kind of society that God would want us to be.** There's far too much fear and scare-mongering in this campaign. May God's kingdom come, and his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.