

## WHAT CAN WE SAY?

We are a few days away from the General Election, and this year there is a special interest in it. As a result of the Referendum, more people are paying attention, the fact that the polls suggest it's too close to call and that Scottish votes may prove more important than before, all combines to create interest.

A couple of weeks ago we held an Election Hustings here and we got the second biggest crowd we have ever seen at this church.

During last year's Independence vote the Church of Scotland was asked to choose a side. It decided not to.

After all, whatever way you voted it would be hard to argue that one view was Christian, and that the other anti-Christian.

For my part I thought the church was right on that view.

On the other hand, I was speaking to someone who used to attend a church not far from here.

At no point (whether through sermons notices or prayers) would you have known there even was a Referendum taking place at all.

That seems to me to be an example of a church bordering on irrelevance.

Politics is the name we give to how we organise the society we live in.

We vote for people to represent us and the outcome has a giant affect on our lives and the lives of others in our country.

It will impact everyone from the youngest to the oldest, from the richest to the poorest.

It will determine what we spend money on,  
where priorities go,  
who we attack or refrain from attacking,  
and will shape what our country is like for good or for ill.

We have an opportunity to take part in this. We may only have one vote, and that might not seem like much, but we do have a vote and if we care about the world we live in, and the values our country pursues we have a responsibility to use it.

So the first thing I would say is that the church needs to get involved in the election, and one way that is done is by the people of God playing their part by voting.

As Christians we should take part in this.

And now the easy question - who should we vote for!

Despite the fact that the church has done this in the past, (and some ministers still do) it is not the job of the Church in Edinburgh or the job of individual parish ministers to say which Party we must all vote for.

There are two reasons why.

First of all, the political parties vying for your vote are human institutions and none of them have a perfect programme.

If you have a Party you favour, think carefully about everything they are promising, proposing and the items that make up their manifesto. If you believe that they are perfect in every detail and on every subject you are kidding yourself.

No Party has all the answers. No Party has all the good ideas. No Party is superior in every detail.

The second reason follows on from this.

In a world like ours where there are all kinds of very different issues and things to consider when making a decision that somehow need to be boiled down to just one single vote it is naive and arrogant in the extreme to say that there is only one Christian response.

So it is not for me to say that if you are a Christian you **MUST** vote for this or that Party or this or that candidate.

But does that mean there is nothing for us to consider as Christians?

Is there nothing we can say?

Are there no guidelines and principles to follow?

The answer to that is a big YES.

The truth is that what happens in our world is not just of concern for you and me.

God is passionately concerned about our world - about how we live and organise and behave towards one another.

God cares about our society – about what it is like – and whether we support or exploit one another.

There is nothing in the Bible about giant multinationals, the NHS, corporate takeovers, bankers bonuses and tax avoiders. There's nothing in scripture about the EU membership, North Sea Oil or University Tuition fees and though the Bible speaks of EVIL it doesn't speak of EVEL (English Votes for English Laws).

But what there **is** in scripture are the principles that God has made clear that matter most – the things that God really cares about. And if we are trying to honour God in our personal lives, in the way we live as individuals, it makes no sense to depart from God's concerns when we consider our life together in the country in which we live.

One of the striking thing about Jesus was that his values were like upside down values. He often had a different take, a different perspective, an unexpected point of view, but his ideas were Gods own.

If we are going to be Jesus people we need to embody these values ourselves.

Because if we don't, then we aren't really that serious about Jesus.

Here's the first thing that Christians should consider.

**Its not about us.**

Well of course it **is** about us – but it's not **just** about us.  
Not if we are looking at it from a Christian perspective.

The most obvious thing at an election time is to think about ourselves.  
Will this Party's plans benefit me? Will I pay less tax? Will I be better off?  
Will they suit my aspirations?

A survey last year before the Big Vote in Scotland showed that a sizeable group of people would vote YES if it meant £10 a week more in their pocket and would vote NO if it meant £10 less!

The only issue for those people was a wee bit of cash for them one way or another...

So what might our wider concerns be? Let me mention four things.

**Concern about the poorest**

As he began his ministry in his manifesto Jesus said he had come to bring "Good News to the Poor."

Now Jesus had Good News for the whole world. But it was especially for the poorest people because those in special need deserve special attention.

In the Bible as a whole, critique of governments are never about good or bad wealth creation or about how they handle the economy but about how well the poorest are being cared for.

In other words God cares deeply about how a society treats those at the bottom rung of the ladder – those who have least in terms of money influence or choices.

Another thing that is related, yet slightly different.

**Concern about Inequality**

Inequality describes the gap between the richest and the poorest in a society. God's concern about this was seen especially in the principle of Jubilee.

Every 25 years land, fields and houses should return to the original owners. This was a way of ensuring that some people didn't get rich at the expense of others, or at least of making sure that the rich didn't continue to get richer and the poorer condemned to being forever poor.

Jubilee was a way of giving people at the lower end of the scale a chance to begin again, and it ensured that the gap between the richest and poorest didn't just grow and grow.

Its interesting that sociologists are now recognising the truth that in some ways what matters most about a healthy society isn't so much how rich or poor it is but what the gap is between the richest and poorest.

You might think that an unequal society is tough on those with less and of course they get it worst, but in fact an unequal society is bad for everyone. There is more stress, crime, competition, materialism, stress, depression and mental illnesses in countries where the gap is largest.

One good thing about the UK is that there is plenty of wealth. One bad thing is that the UK is one of the world's most unequal nations. So this is something that urgently needs to be tackled.

Here's a third issue for Christians to bear in mind.

### **Concern about Trident**

You might think this is a very party political issue, but its one that results in divisions inside the parties as I'll explain in a moment. Though most of the biggest parties officially back renewing our nuclear weapons system there are great numbers of MPs in these same parties who are not convinced.

The truth is that this is actually a 'church' issue, and particularly a Church of Scotland one.

For more than 30 years the Church of Scotland has named and condemned Trident every single year and been utterly dismissive of it. The church has called on politicians of every stripe to work for its removal.

None of the main political parties have been so vocal about this issue over that time.

Now, all the mainstream churches in the UK are at one on this.

People are finally beginning to realise that the Church has been right all along about this.

Why should be a big issue for the church?

It's a huge issue for Christians because its about deception and morals.

Trident is an indiscriminate killer.

Its use would result in the deaths of millions of innocent men women and children. To unleash it would be an evil act.

But to threaten to do it, (just by possessing it at all) is in itself an act of aggression towards the rest of the world.

Trident is a perverted status symbol.

There's a tendency for British leaders to try an act as if our country is more important than others. They believe we have something that enables us to strut around the world stage as if we are still in charge of the world.

Its not our moral choices, our generous example or even our economy.

It's the fact that we have the deadliest most dangerous weapons of mass destruction. In a sense Trident is no more than a big boy's toy.

And here's the thing. It's got nothing to do with defence.

As they come to retirement, the military generals are finally free to speak and they say Trident has got nothing to do with the defence of this country. The Armed Forces need conventional equipment - not weapons that have no strategic use.

Ah but you can't dis-invent nuclear bombs, people say...  
Well you can't dis-invent gas chambers, concentration camps, land mines or chemical weapons either but it doesn't mean that we have to have them.

To spend £100 billion over the next few years on that when half the world starves and when in the UK poverty rises, and our education system and NHS needs more support is a nutcase choice.

The fact is our politicians know this.

83% of all candidates for this election admitted they would vote against the renewal of Trident if they had a free choice.  
As for the Labour Party, 75% of all their election hopefuls said the same thing!

So what we need to do is to keep challenging the politicians to follow their conscience – to do what is right, and to have the courage of their convictions.

Irrespective of who gets into power after the election we have got to continue to press our elected leaders on positive action on removing Trident once and for all.

One final issue....

### **Concern about the politics of Hate.**

We now have openly racist parties who are given TV platforms to preach their form of Xenophobia.  
These are people for whom immigrants and asylum seekers are the cause of all our ills.

And who would seek to raise money at home by cutting out our overseas aid budget to the world's poorest people.

That's the very small proportion that we contribute towards alleviating those who are daily starving to death, and dying from easily treatable diseases.

There's a smiling man who says this is his Party's policy on TV leaders debates, bold as brass, and he wants us to vote for him?!!!

So doesn't it matter who wins?  
Are all the options equally bad?  
Is there really nothing to choose between?  
Of course there is!

People of goodwill need to get out there and play their part.  
And those of us who are Christians need to get to the ballot box and cast a vote on what we believe matters to God.

How does this tie in with Jesus the vine?

We can live our own life easily enough. We can vote for whatever suits us and spare a thought for no one or nothing else. That can be our life.  
It's easy enough to live such a way.

But if we are to take Jesus seriously, and if we are looking to build a life based on his teaching and example then we need to unite ourselves with the values that Jesus cared about.

The life of Jesus was one that responded to others and not just selfish advantage.

The Bible tells us that if we love God we need to love the people around us.

How do we love others?

We love others by considering them, showing compassion and concern to what might happen to them.

To love others means to have a wider perspective – to consider much more than what is good only for us - and our family.

To love others as God loves means to have a particular concern for those in need – those who are poor, vulnerable and at the bottom of the social order.

And when we vote, what will that prove?

It will prove we are taking our faith seriously.

It's a sign that we are taking seriously our responsibility to love and care for our sisters and brothers.

*“We love because God first loved us.  
The command that Christ has given us is this:  
whoever loves God must love his sister and brother also.”  
(1 John 4:19,21)*

1 John 4:7-21

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