

My Neighbour, My Vote

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 14 July 2013, by David Gill. The readings were Amos 7:7-17 and St Luke 10:25-37

Two important readings.

First, Amos. He was a prophet, called to speak truth to the powers of his day. It was a time of prosperity. People were comfortable. The Israelites believed their affluence was evidence of God's blessing. But they were failing to share their prosperity with the poor. They were religious. But their religious life did not flow on into the nation's relationships. Faith was not being translated into social justice.

The prophet has a vision involving a plumb line – a length of string with a weight tied to it, used to check whether a wall had been built straight. The wall, here, represents Israel. Measured against the plumb line of God's will, the wall, Israel, is found to be warped, defective, out of alignment. So, no longer will these unfaithful people be spared. Judgement, severe judgement, is in prospect.

“Let justice roll down like waters,” Amos had written a couple of chapters earlier, “and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

From justice in our first reading, we moved in the second to its close relation, love.

The story of the good Samaritan must surely be one of the best known passages in the Bible.

Jesus has just made an important point: love of God and love of neighbour is what life is all about. Then comes the question: “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus' story is a double-barrelled response. First answer: the neighbour is the person, any person, who is in need. But then Jesus neatly reverses the question: who behaved like a neighbour? Answer to that: the man – incidentally a Samaritan, a despised outsider, a person of another faith -- who saw the other's need and did something about it.

The double-edged implication is clear. Painfully clear. Inescapably clear. Mark Twain once said “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts I do understand”. The Samaritan story is one we all understand. Right? Though we sometimes wish we didn’t. Right??

Fast forward to our own time. When the Uniting Church was formed, in 1977, one of its first actions was to issue a Statement to the Nation. This step towards Christian unity, it said, is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race. The statement closed with these words:

“The first allegiance of Christians is to God, under whose judgement the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realize that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church ... must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive. We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere – the family of the one God, the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth, the One who gave his life for others. In the Spirit of his self-giving love, we seek to go forward.”

Powerful words. What might they mean for us, here and now?

Here and now, we are just months from a federal election. One Saturday, between mid-August and the end of November, the country will line up for its triennial date with democracy. We’ll be marking our ballot papers for the House of Representatives and half the Senate.

An important responsibility. I want to speak to you this morning about how we exercise it. I’m not going to tell you who you should vote for. That’s not my job. But I am going to ask you to think carefully about your vote and how your Christian faith should impinge upon it. That is my job.

The key word is -- think! A lot of what passes for political debate in this country takes the form of personal denigration, facile slogans and five-second sound grabs. Important but complex issues get trivialized. As the American essayist H L Mencken remarked: “To every human problem there is a solution that is simple,

neat – and wrong!” It’s time to say to our leaders and would-be leaders: “Kindly refrain from treating us like children!”

Think when you’re marking that ballot paper too. Many people vote one way or another, for this party or that, because – well, that’s the way I’ve always voted. Not good enough. Times change. So do parties and issues. We change too, or we should. So think. And when you consider how you’re going to vote, remember it’s not a sin to swing!

Seven points to factor into your thinking:

1. Don’t just ask which party’s policies might advantage yourself, your family or your particular group – be it the the aged, small business, shareholders, whatever. Last Sunday, Roman Catholic congregations around Australia received a letter from their bishops about the election. Look beyond self-interest, the bishops urged, and consider “the common good”. Wise advice, not only for Christians.

2. As you consider the common good, bear in mind what Amos had to say – not just Amos, the entire prophetic stream – about the importance of social justice. Especially justice for the poor, the forgotten, the despised, the stranger in our midst. Our efforts in this regard will always be tentative, provisional, imperfect. But the goal is a God-given imperative. How can we pursue it responsibly amid the stubborn realities of today, through the nation’s political process of collective decision-making? It’s complicated. So ...

3. Draw on the wisdom of the church. We’re not left struggling with these dilemmas alone. To help, the National Assembly of the Uniting Church asked some experts to produce a booklet entitled *A Just Society: Your Faith, Your Voice, Your Vote*. There’s a copy in the porch, and you can find it on the Uniting Church’s website. It addresses justice for Aboriginal peoples, for asylum seekers and refugees, ensuring our future by tackling climate change, improving aged care, protecting human rights in Australia, the situation of people in remote areas of the country, embracing our cultural and religious diversity, and overcoming poverty internationally. A helpful resource.

4. Don't forget the saga of the good Samaritan. Justice and love belong together. Christ's call to good neighbourliness is in no way replaced or diminished by the concern for social justice. Compassion for the other can mitigate the evil of even the worst social order – think slavery, and the difference kindness by a slave owner could make. Lacking such compassion, even the best social order can be a soulless bureaucracy.

5. Remember that, seen through Christian eyes, political differences are always between flawed human beings, never between sinners on one side and the righteous on the other. That recognition should mitigate pride, self-righteousness and vindictiveness. It should take the sting out of how people deal with their opponents. And it ought to make us wary of extremist sentiment and language of all kinds. Use whatever opportunities come your way to inject more civility into Australia's political debate. Keep telling yourself, and anyone else who will listen, that if your candidate wins, it won't produce a perfect Australia. And if he or she loses, it's probably not the end of the world. Faith in God means, among other things, keeping politics in perspective.

6. Do not join the chorus of those who rubbish politicians. Be grateful for those who offer themselves for public office. It's a thankless task involving atrocious hours, mediocre salaries, a bad public image, collateral damage to families and no job security whatsoever. Men and women who put their hands up for election deserve better than to be met with cynicism. Be thankful for them. Pray for them. And mean it.

7. Never lose sight of the good news of the gospel. The good news is not that we're striving for social justice or practising good neighbourliness. We should be doing both, of course, but we know that at the end of the day all such efforts will prove flawed and inadequate. Defects in our social aspirations and relationships, in our political platforms and policies, in our own hearts and minds, will remain. The love and justice of the kingdom of God press upon us, but they are always beyond our achieving. Perfection eludes our grasp. That's the sobering news.

The good news is that there is another reality, a resource of divine mercy able to overcome the contradictions and failures that we cannot. The gospel tells us that

beyond our guilt, there is grace. Beyond our failure, hope. Beyond our sin, the ever-present possibility of forgiveness and new beginnings.

That is good news indeed. For the nation as a whole. For those who will find themselves members of Australia's 44th federal parliament. And for those of us whose votes are going to put them there.

Thanks be to God.

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