

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2017

Try as we might, and sometimes we do try quite hard, it's very difficult to ignore politics. It's all pervasive, and has been even more so in the last week as another budget is handed down. It is one of times when politics really does have an impact on all of us. Fortunately for most of us it is simply a matter of the effect on our hip pocket and we adjust accordingly, for some however it's much greater. I am sure that every single one of us is aware of someone who is affected, by Tuesday's speech by the Treasurer.

It seems to me, and I acknowledge this is a rather simplistic view, that politicians operate along a spectrum of thought. At the extremes of the spectrum there are those who are driven by ideology, we can see those folk in both left and right camps. There are the pragmatists who endeavour to transcend ideology and then of course there are a majority who fall between these two poles in varying places on spectrum and often moving and issues dictate. Jean-Pierre Raffarin the one time French Prime Minister once said 'we have a country which loves ideology and we need pragmatism.' Truth be known neither thinking is *completely* satisfactory. Idealism can blind us to the realities of life. Carl Jung the great Swiss Psychologist wrote 'every form of addiction is bad; no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol, morphine or idealism!' Pragmatism in its purist form endeavours to hold together the good, the true *and* the useful. But, of course, this can become skewed what is useful is not always good and true. And of course there is always the difficult question what is good, and what is true? Another Frenchman Charles de Gaulle once famously said that 'politics is far too serious a matter to be left to politicians' and he is quite right. To whom then should this grave responsibility fall?

All too often we are told that religion and matters of faith have no place in political life. It is often said that the problem is primarily one about authority: Is political authority to be grounded in the claims of revelation or reason, Jerusalem or Athens? I don't believe that the two are incompatible. Matters of faith belong at the heart of our political life and I believe that as Christians we have a responsibility to be involved, because whilst we may not always be at the forefront of what is 'useful' we have something to say about goodness and truth.

Politics and religion have always been uncomfortable partners. Amos, is perhaps the most 'political' of the OT Prophets. He lived in the court of Jeroboam II but was expelled because of his uncomfortable preaching, he clashed heads with the religious and state authorities, he denounced the Kings reliance on military might and his poor record in social justice...sounds familiar?!

Jesus too of course fell afoul of the state. Pilate eventually found it easier to appease the mob, wash his hands of the whole affair and leave Jesus to his awful fate. In the early part of the second century another Roman Governor

Pliny encountered the Christians in his province and wrote to the Emperor, Trajan to seek his advice. Like Pilate before him he could find no wrong with what Christians were doing, but they were different and they threatened the status quo. Pliny didn't seem to seek the Christians out, but he was quite happy to execute them if he came across them.

In the Middle Ages Thomas Becket was executed while saying Mass in Canterbury Cathedral. Thomas had a social conscience of sorts and realised that his former high life could no longer continue after his elevation to the See of Canterbury. He was out of step with the monarch and his death followed the unfortunate words of King Henry II "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

In more modern times and in our own Diocese Bishop Ernest Burgmann became something of a thorn in the side of the politicians. On Wednesday the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture will hold a commemoration of his life and legacy on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. The centre's director Bp Stephen Pickard will give a lecture titled "That Meddlesome God: A Christian Future for the Church." A title that perhaps gives you something of idea of how Burgmann was viewed by some in Government. Burgmann was an agitator and was galvanised by the Great Depression. He shared these years with the workers and the miners of the Hunter Valley and became involved in many social and ethical issues speaking out against the extremes of capitalism.

St Peter writes his first letter to a group cut off from their roots, the diaspora, among the first generation of Christians. They are persecuted, ostracised, many are slaves and lack the protection of citizenship. Peter advocates a form of Christian pragmatism. The need to work within the structures of the state. *For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. Fear God. Honour the emperor.*

It is a tough gig! The Church has no place in party politics but it belongs at the heart of the Body Politic. Unlike Stephen and those who followed him under the rule of Emperors like Trajan and their governors, we live in safety and have the opportunity to exercise our faith. We may be maligned for speaking out, particularly in today's climate but it is something that every Christian throughout the ages has been called to do. Sometimes at great cost.

Many of our politicians are people of conscience. Some are idealists, some pragmatists. We as Christians need to reflect of both these strands, we need both faith and we need to discover what it is that works for the good of all. Jesus recognised this as he spoke to his disciples, recognising their struggles: Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Amen.