

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 2008

Rev. Graham McAnalley

Romans 13: 1-10

“Citizenship and Discipleship”

There is a scene at the beginning of the book of Job where Satan appears in the heavenly court and God asks him where he has been. And Satan replies: “From going to and fro on the earth.” Well, I feel a bit like Satan this morning, having returned last Monday night from travelling in some eight countries of Asia and Europe, and through a couple more, over the last eight and half weeks.

Five weeks ago I was in Germany staying with a friend of mine who is a pastor in the Protestant church in a rural area north of Berlin. His father before him was a pastor, ordained a little before the outbreak of World War 2 in a secret ceremony by the Confessing Church in Germany. That minority movement within the Protestant Church opposed Hitler and the Nazi regime and, therefore, separated themselves from the majority of the Church – the so-called “German Christians” – that supported Hitler. The Confessing Church became an underground church, and many of their clergy and members were imprisoned or executed for their opposition to the Nazi government.

Now listen again to verses we heard earlier from Paul’s Letter to the Romans:

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities;
for there is no authority except from God, and those
authorities that exist have been instituted by God.
Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has
appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement.*

Well, what do you make of those diametrically opposite points of view? Was the Confessing Church wrong to oppose Hitler and the Nazi regime as the government of the day in Germany? Or were those Christians actively supporting Hitler or acquiescing in his regime wrong, even if they appeared to be following the advice of St Paul?

Those questions, while relating to Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, are still relevant. They cannot be relegated to the past and forgotten – for they go to the very heart of an important aspect of Christian discipleship.

That passage from the Letter to the Romans has had a profound influence over the centuries. In some parts of the church it has led to the development of a doctrine of “The Two Kingdoms” – the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world – in which the governing bodies of the time are considered God-appointed and supreme, and in which the church ought not to interfere. It’s a passage that has been quoted enthusiastically in support of the “divine right of kings” to rule as they please without any accountability to anyone. It has been used in nominally Christian countries to demand support for the most despotic regimes. Hitler was not the first, nor the last, to use it. One has even heard an echo of it in some Australian politicians, no doubt brought up in good Bible-believing homes, when they tell church leaders that their job is to fill church pews, not to comment upon political issues and government policies of the day.

Those of you who look up the Lectionary readings before attending worship will have noticed that I

have modified the Epistle reading set for today by starting it at the beginning of chapter 13 of Romans, rather than at verse 8, and by deleting some verses at the end of the passage set. I have chosen to do this because of the influence that these early verses of the chapter have had over the centuries and because, as far as I can see, they are not included elsewhere in our three year Lectionary.

Let's go back for a minute or two to the story with which I began. What would have been the situation if the Protestant Church in Germany, the predominant church in the land, had not supported or acquiesced in the policies of Hitler and his regime? Had they not been so influenced by centuries of teaching about the governing authorities being instituted by God, then Hitler would not have enjoyed the groundswell of support he received – and the world might have been spared World War 2, or at least the worst of its atrocities and the slaughter of six million Jews, including one and a half million Jewish children. The Christian Church, both in Germany and elsewhere, bears an awful responsibility for much of what happened under the Nazi regime.

Well, back to St Paul. What are we to make of his words to the Roman Christians of his day?

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities;
for there is no authority except from God, and those
authorities that exist have been instituted by God.
Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God
has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement.*

Well, it will be obvious by now that I don't believe Paul had the last word to say on Christian attitudes towards the State. He didn't! But Paul, like all the biblical writers, was influenced by the situation in which he lived. He lived in the Roman Empire, a cruel and despotic regime if ever there was one. But not everything about it was bad, especially from Paul's point of view. As a Roman citizen he was free to travel on his missionary journeys; he benefitted from the 'Pax Romana', the peace of the Roman Empire, however barbarously that was enforced; he recognised the need, as should we all, for human societies to be ordered and governed if they are to survive; and he was realistic enough to know that opposition to Roman rule had no chance of success. And, to be fair to Paul, he saw the governing authorities of the day having a God-given responsibility to rule for the benefit, the well-being, of the people. He says:

*For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad....
Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval;
for it is God's servant for your good.*

The question is: when a governing authority clearly is not "God's servant for your good", what should be the Christian's attitude to it?

That was a question faced by Christians fairly soon after Paul's time when Roman persecution of the church became harsher and harsher. It is a question which Christians, and others of good conscience, have wrestled with over the centuries.

We live today in a world very different from that of Paul and the early Christians. We live in a democracy where we have a say in who is elected to govern us and we are free to comment on government policies and to campaign actively to have policies changed. This freedom, and the democratic process, lays a responsibility upon us as Christian disciples.

No government is perfect, and we cannot expect it to be. Not all government policies are necessarily right or good. As Christians we should not passively accept whatever our democratically elected

governments say and do. We should be prepared to be constructively critical from a Christian perspective, asking whether in particular situations the government of the day is serving the good of the people in the most appropriate way.

The criterion by which we assess government policies and actions is the same criterion by which we assess our own actions; and it is given to us by Paul in the same passage we read this morning:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another....

'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Love does no wrong to a neighbour....

Love of neighbour not only applies in our personal and individual dealings with others. It also applies in our social or communal relationships – in how we relate to and treat communities and groups of people. In assessing the actions and policies of those who govern us, the question which should be asked by Christians is not, “How do these policies affect me?”, but “How do these policies affect the most needy, the most vulnerable, the most disadvantaged in our society?” They are, after all, our neighbours – whether they are known to us or unknown, whether they live near or far away, whether they share our beliefs and mores or not.

Christian discipleship requires of us that we be good citizens, not only by living law-abiding lives, but by valuing and using our democratic freedoms to ensure that the most vulnerable and needy are valued, respected and cared for as neighbours.