

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2010

Mr Robert Sanderson

Luke 13: 31-35

“Changing the Wind”

Usually when we are at dinner with our friends the conversation is relaxed and we feel free enough to discuss most topics. When with strangers it is a different matter as there are certain topics the experienced diner avoids! So it is with our address today. So much so that I considered giving it an R-rating and adding the symbols PR after it. This doesn't stand for *public relations*; it stands for *politics* and *religion*. For some in polite company these separately are taboo topics – but together...

And yet, this is exactly what our reading from Luke is about. Jesus was a very popular teacher and healer who was giving people a sense of value and worth. He could only do this by criticizing the society because he had a great vision of what things could be like when people were free and cared about one another. His words and actions were about more than changing people; they were about changing the world that produced their misery. The religious and political leaders had a difficult task maintaining stability way out on the fringes of the Roman Empire. To them, Jesus was seen as a real threat to their power and he challenges Herod directly. Jesus calls him a fox, and that isn't a joke. We think of it as being a mild reference to being 'sly' but there was nothing mild about this term in Jesus' time. Herod would very much want to see himself as a lion rather than a rabbit catcher! This challenge to the secular leaders and the religious leaders of the temple could not go unanswered and we know the outcome.

Luke wants to remind the followers of Jesus that they, too, must be concerned about dealing with those in power and what that power can do to people.

I

As I said at the beginning, talking politics has the effect of polarizing people. I want to express exactly where I am coming from. I am not taking sides or referring to individuals at all in this discussion. What I have to say refers to the process of governance and of wielding political power. I am particularly interested in the role that religion has in this process and our response to it. It is clear that religion is increasingly being used in political discussions. If you listen to the language of politicians, you will increasingly hear religious language being used (probably because it is designed to appeal to a particular demographic). On the religious side, it is not unknown for a religious leader (or group) to publically support, if not endorse, a particular political party. But one thing is certain. God does not vote! God is not on any party's side and cannot be claimed as such.

We are all familiar with the part religion plays in American elections. In many states candidates publically declare their religious affiliations and beliefs. Jim Wallis, in his book, *“God's Politics: Why the American Right gets it wrong and the Left doesn't get it”* says:

there are “two ways that religion has been brought into public life in American history. The first way – God on our side – leads inevitably to triumphalism, self-righteousness, bad theology, and, often dangerous foreign policy. The second way – asking if we are on God's

side – leads to much healthier things, namely penitence and even repentance, humility, reflection and even accountability.”

The outstanding Lutheran poet Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) wrote the words of our anthem, “Cometh sunshine after rain” in 1656. This was a direct response to the thirty years religious war. The original last line is “God is ours; all things are ours”. The meaning is clear to see: “God is on our side.” I hope you can also see the reason why I changed it to “We are God’s; new life is ours.”

Abraham Lincoln was concerned about this distinction and rather than declaring ‘God is on our side’, he wanted people to really worry about whether *they were on ‘God’s side’*. (ibid)

Now, there are also those who claim that religion is an irrelevance to politics and has no part in a secular society. I suspect those who hold this view are bound to be disappointed since, at the last census, 13 million Australians were affiliated with a religion.

In many ways this is a reaction to religion’s bad reputation when allied with secular power. Lord Acton’s comment that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” applies just as much to theocracies as it does to other forms of government. Extreme fundamentalist forms of Christianity (or other religions), when allied with political power, can be absolutely devastating because they inevitably lead to the desire to control all those in the society. There is no such thing as faith by coercion as we have seen time and time again throughout history.

II

Here are the big questions as I see it.

1. Should religion be directly allied with the exercise of political power? To answer this it would be necessary to decide whether it opens up both the political and religious power groups to corruption to vested interests. On the other hand, if religion is separated from the source of power, then it can independently call the political powers to task without compromise. This naturally involves a loss of power but it is worth it.
2. What about religious diversity? The question comes down to which religion (or denomination) would be tied to the secular power? It would be naïve to think that there could be any effective power-sharing between all groups. The secular power would not tolerate it. This would result in many voices being excluded in order to support the views and values of a particular group. If you think this is impossible in Australia, you only have to consider the possibility of a religious party gaining power or a particular religious group fielding lots of candidates.
3. What about those who see religion as a private matter and believe it has no part whatsoever in politics inside or outside the power structure? As far as Christianity is concerned, they have failed to see that all of scripture is about politics. *God is political*. There are endless stories about people being oppressed, being caught up in wars, suffering slavery, struggling against poverty and starvation. There is always a struggle against the powers that would diminish human existence.
4. So what are the fundamental values that Christians need to concentrate on in the social sphere? They are justice, peace, compassion, respect for others, love of neighbor. These values are not narrowly defined, they are universal. *God is the God of all humanity*. They apply to everyone – irrespective of country, culture or nationality and, as I understand it, all

the Abrahamic faiths and maybe others as well.

This is the real confrontation that religion has with secular powers because it challenges every religious person. How do we reconcile these values with political and social reality? Which is the higher allegiance? I am sure this is a question faced by many politicians frequently and they must do their best. I guess, for the rest of us, we tend to think of something else and ignore the question. And that is a great pity.

5. Finally in this section, we have a point that cannot be said often enough. I have said that these values we have been discussing are universal and that means that you do not have to be religious to believe in them. There are countless numbers of people who are not religious and yet live a highly principled, ethical life. *Despite what they sometimes think, religious people do not have a monopoly on goodness.* What religious people do have is a spiritual life that they find essential to their existence and well-being.

III

Lent is a time for self-reflection and here are a few pointers you might like to use to assess political and social policy. Before you try this, however, it is good idea to examine your own attitudes to social policy lest you overlook *your* blindspots!

What does it mean exactly to be on God's side?

- *God has a passion for justice.* The poor, the weak, the homeless, the sick must be supported. Any policy that supports the rich and, in so doing, condemns the poor cannot be just.
- *God has a passion for supporting the poor.* Removing global poverty must be given a priority. The most recent assessment of the Millennium Goals was at the end of last year. The worst progress has been made in the area of child malnutrition. More than half of the countries with available data are not on track to achieve the Millennium Goal for child malnutrition by 2015.
- *God has a passion for peace.* Peacemaking is a continuing process. War is a failure of that process. It is sometimes helpful to ask the questions: "Who suffers in this war?" and "Who benefits from this war?"
- *God has a passion for creation.* Global environmental sustainability is essential for the survival of the planet but those most at risk are the poorer nations. They do not have the resources to cope and are dependent on the rich nations.
- *God is the source of hope.* Always be cautious of fear and fear-mongering. The antidote to fear is reason and hard evidence. The use of fear to achieve a political outcome is patronizing and dishonest.

IV

Jim Wallis tells this delightful story:

I urged the moms on the Mall not to waste any valuable time while they were in Washington. I wanted them to be able to quickly recognize the members of Congress whom they had come to see. They're the ones, I told them, who walk around town with their fingers held high in the air, having just licked them and put them up to see which way the wind was blowing. It's quite a sight – men and women walking all around the Capital grounds with their wet index fingers pointed at the sky. The political leaders are really very good at figuring out the direction of the wind, and are quite used to quickly moving in that direction.

He then went on to say that most politicians, when they went in to politics wanted to make a difference but discovered that power and money were the real drivers. They found themselves having to work within these realities. But he then goes on to say this:

Many of us believe that by replacing one wet-fingered politician with another, we can change our society. But it never really works, and when it doesn't, we get disillusioned. We then get tempted to just grumble, withdraw or just grumble altogether on ever changing anything. But that's where we make our mistake.

The great practitioners of real social change, like Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Ghandi, understood something very important. They knew that you don't change the society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by *changing the wind*.

He means moving the debate to a new place; change the context; transform the discussion to see it from a different perspective and then it allows the politicians to ride the wind.

We have just seen a classic case of this 'changing the wind' with the British Government. Haiti is an exceptionally poor country. It has owed Britain millions for many years without any real hope of paying it back. Last week, because of the horrific destruction, the British Government completely cancelled Haiti's debt. I am sure you can think of many changes in wind direction brought about by people standing up for what they believe in.

The biggest changes in wind direction are always achieved by those with a vision of a better world.