

## Finding and Serving God in the Political Arena.

I believe that all of us, as Christians, are called to be involved in politics in the broadest sense of the word. If we look up definitions of the word 'political' in the dictionary, it means 'pertaining to civil government and its administration'; 'the art or science of civil government'.

So although not all of us will necessarily be called to be involved in 'Party politics' as such and join a political tribe, and even fewer of us will be called to make a career out of being a politician, nevertheless, all of us are called to be involved in the welfare, direction and public policy of the citizens among whom we live. This is politics in its broadest sense.

However, people in general and Christians in particular, have very different views about involvement in the political scene.

We know that there are those who love politics and get excited about it. The author Robert Harris says this: 'Politics is the essence of life; it's the most incredible theatre of characters, drama, incident, unexpected events, human frailties and astonishing courage. The whole business, the cavalcade, fascinates me all the time.'

For some, politics becomes an idol. Each party has its 'messiah' figure, colours, manifestos; some have their own flags and anthems; loyalty and commitment to the party is paramount. The party is more important than any individual.

And we also know that there are others, perhaps even the majority, who are put off completely by politics, especially party politics. Disillusionment is rife; political polarisation and aggression have increased. So the underlying question I would like to ask is this: 'Is it possible to find and serve God in the political arena?'

Some would argue that it is much more difficult today than it was centuries or even just decades ago. For centuries the social, political, judicial, scientific and ethical life of people in the UK was based on Christian principles. Indeed, verses from the Bible were, and still are in many cases, securely engraved in most of our public buildings. For example, in the floor of the Central lobby, which connects the House of Commons with the House of Lords in our Parliament building, are engraved these words from Psalm 127:1, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain." Surely, we trample on those words (even though they are written in Latin) at our peril.

In the Great Hall of the Old Bailey, the Central Criminal Court of England & Wales, are inscribed these words from the book of Proverbs (13:14), "The Law of the wise is a fountain of life."

In the hallway of Old Broadcasting House in London, are these words: "This temple of the arts and muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors in the year of our Lord 1931, John Reith being director-general. And they pray that good seed sown may bring forth good harvest, and that all things foul or hostile to peace may be banished thence, and that the people inclining their ear to whatsoever things are lovely and honest, whatsoever things are of good report, may tread the path of virtue and wisdom."

And over the doors of the Cavendish Physics laboratory in Cambridge are inscribed these words from Psalm 111:2, "The works of the Lord are great; sought out of all them that have pleasure therein."



But for many, these verses are now just relics, vestigial remains from a bygone age.

Perhaps another significant sign of our drift away from God is a report which came out earlier this year from the Cooperative Funeral Care Service, one of the largest in the country. They reported that for the first time ever, there were now no Christian hymns in the top 10 musical items requested at funeral services they have conducted. Not even that old favourite 'The Lord's My Shepherd' to the tune 'Crimond' could make it.

So 'What's in the top 10?' I hear you ask. Well, at number 10 is Eric Idle's 'Always look on the bright side of life'; at number 6 is Ed Sheeran's 'Supermarket Flowers'; at number 3 is Eva Cassidy's 'Over the Rainbow, and still at number 1, and top of the pops, is Frank Sinatra's 'I did it my way'.

However, let's return to the current political scene. As we listen to politicians, we may find it difficult to know whom to trust, remembering that trust always has to be based on truth. We cannot trust lies. Today we are more familiar with phrases like 'double talk', 'alternative facts' and 'fake news'. People are said to have 'an uneasy relationship with the truth'. So often, it seems, truth has to be beaten, bent and cut to the required shape.

Trustworthy, reliable truth has become a much rarer commodity, not only in politics but also in society at large. But should we be surprised by the demise of truth? Does it not follow that when God gets pushed aside, truth also gets pushed aside?

Exploring this further, surely this is because God is Truth. Jesus said, 'I am the Truth' and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. Wherever God gets left out, truth becomes scarcer. It also becomes more relative; there is no objective truth any more, only subjective truth. What's true for me might not be true for you and vice versa. Societies that weaken their hold on God will inevitably weaken their hold on truth. And without truth everything collapses into conjecture, guesswork, rumour and hearsay, all of which lack any authority.

Think of that famous political and civic leader, Pontius Pilate. Jesus said to him: "I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (Jn.18:37). But Pilate was very disparaging about the idea of truth and spat out the words, "What is truth?"

I wonder why it is that so many people, like Pilate, turn away from God's truth? Perhaps truth no longer matters when it no longer serves our purposes. We would rather suppress the truth, exchange it for lies and believe the lies because, in the short term at least, we think that will serve our own interests better. Truth can so easily become a victim of expediency. But neither does the search for truth ever go away.



It's interesting that the strap-line of the environmental pressure group 'Extinction Rebellion' is: "Tell the Truth". But what is the truth about climate change? The government says our greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 42% since 1990. However, Greta Thunberg told our M.P.'s that the true reduction was more like 10%. It's not always easy to discover what is true.



The strap-line for the Campaign Group 'Grenfell United' is: 'Justice for Grenfell: We demand the truth'. And Boris Johnson said of the survivors and relatives of those who died in the fire, as the initial report about the fire came out recently, 'They asked for the **truth**, we promised them the **truth**. And today the whole country, the whole world is finally hearing the **truth** about what happened in the Grenfell fire.'

But back to Pilate; He was afraid. Confronted by Jesus ('The Truth') he didn't know what to do. He said to Jesus: "Don't you realise that I have the authority ('exousia') to free you or to crucify you." And Jesus replied with the following words which I find amazing, exhilarating and full of hope, "**You would have no authority over me if it were not given to you from above**" (Jn. 19:11).



This means that in the political arena, as in all arenas, despite the political shenanigans, the apparent chaos, Pilate's protestations, and despite the pain and suffering of crucifixion for Jesus, there **is** someone who has overall authority and therefore overall control of it all. And that person is God Himself.

It is precisely in these areas of political, environmental and economic power that our God reigns and exercises His sovereign activity, whether you and I recognise Him or not.

The Bible always avoids sliding into either fatalism on the one hand, or determinism on the other. It affirms that as human beings we are morally responsible for our choices and actions and their public consequences in the political arena, as in all arenas.

Yet God retains sovereign control over final outcomes and destinies. He will have the deciding vote in every election. The ultimate power is with Him.

So those who are involved in politics should never overestimate the power and authority they think they have. At the same time, however, we have to remember that politics IS about the acquisition, apportioning and exercise of power within our community. And God calls us to exercise that power and authority under Him because ultimately, we are accountable to Him.

The apostle Paul said: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength (that's about tapping into God's resources). Jesus said: "All **authority** in heaven and on earth is given to me; go therefore with that authority and make disciples of all nations." And Jesus also said: "You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses."

Resources, authority and power: God gives us the resources, Jesus gives us the authority and the Holy Spirit gives us the power so that we may be effective in all arenas including the political arena.

So, returning to the original question: 'Is it possible to find and serve God in the political arena?' we must say, 'Yes, without doubt!'

God is supremely interested in what goes on in the political arena, the public square, the marketplace, or as it was called in the Old Testament, 'the gate', i.e. the place of human social engagement and activity.

Throughout the Bible we see men and women called by God to minister in this very arena. We see **Joseph** who was trafficked as a slave from Israel to Egypt and even reported 'missing-presumed-dead' back home.

I wonder if you have ever thought of Joseph as being the first man to set up a Foodbank!! That's exactly what he did.

During 7 years of abundance he stored grain in vast storehouses all over Egypt in the main cities. And then when the 7 years of famine started, he opened the storehouses and provided grain not only for Egypt but for all the surrounding nations as well. There's nothing new about God and his people being involved with Foodbanks and services to the local/national community.

We see **Daniel** who was taken prisoner by an invading army and was brought up as part of a despised ethnic minority in an enemy land. We see **Esther**, a woman who started life as an abducted sex-slave for King Xerxes.

**Joseph, Daniel and Esther** all ended up serving at the top levels of pagan imperial governments because even in those places (or we could say **especially** in those places) God has his people and works through them for his purposes.

~ Another man in the OT who was an outstanding example of a lay person furthering God's work in the political arena was **Nehemiah**. He wasn't a Prophet, he wasn't a Priest or Levite, he was a Civil Servant.

And he was characterised by 3 things which made him effective:

First of all, he was a prayerful man. We need to be prayerful for all those in the political arena that God's gracious hand will be upon them.

Secondly, he was a passionate man. He was someone who was in touch with his feelings. There were times when he felt sad and wept. There were times when he felt anxious and afraid. There were times when he was angry at some of the injustices he saw, particularly to do with the poor, the marginalised and the abused. And there were times when he was ecstatic with joy: "The joy of the Lord is my strength," he said.

I can't tell you how sad and angry I felt recently when another young man in his 20's was stabbed to death in broad daylight about 150 yards away from where we were staying in Enfield; such a waste... and for what?

Thirdly, Nehemiah was an intensely practical man, as he led the project to rebuild the broken-down wall of Jerusalem.

Finally, in the New Testament, we meet a guy called **Erastus**. He was a Christian, a co-worker with the apostle Paul, and an aedile in the Roman city of Corinth. He was a magistrate who had the portfolio for public and private buildings. In Romans 16:23 we read, 'Erastus, who is the city's director of public works (oikonomos) ...sends his greetings.' He also controlled the purse strings; he was the city Treasurer!

A Latin inscription found in Corinth says this, 'Erastus laid this pavement at his own expense, in appreciation of his appointment as aedile.'

People in the early Church saw no division between gospel/church ministry on the one hand, and being involved in politics on the other i.e. seeking the welfare, as benefactors, of the people who lived in the towns and cities where they lived. Serving God and serving the community in public office went hand in hand.

And it is to this broad involvement in political life that we are all called.

One day the government will be on Jesus' shoulders and we will rule with him. It's good to get some practice in now! And His kingdom will be an eternal one; no one will ever be able to vote him out of office.

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