

Scripture Reflection: July. St. Paul and Politics

Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "When people say religion and politics don't mix, I wonder what Bible it is they're reading." Of course, he received much venom for speaking truth to power in the apartheid state of South Africa. The prophets of the Old Testament too, had a bad time of speaking God's truths to the kings of their day: Isaiah was put in a hollow tree and sawn in half. Jeremiah was dumped in a water cistern, John the Baptist had his head cut off, Jesus was crucified and Paul had his head cut off too.

In July, coincidentally, politics is quite central to the New Testament reading as each Sunday has a passage from St Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul has been very misunderstood as being an unqualified supporter of the rulers of countries no matter what they do. This has been exploited sometimes by those in power, but it's because of a mistranslation of the Greek he wrote. The phrase "huppo-tasso" was taken to mean "submit" but really its true meaning is that things should be arranged "in an orderly fashion". It refers to imitating the order God the Creator has in the perfect order and design of his creation. Paul uses the same phrase about the relationship between husbands and wives who should live together in a respectful and ordered fashion too. It does not mean that one should be subject to the other no matter what they do.

We take for granted the intrinsic political language we use in the most fundamental elements of our Christian life. Every time we say the Our Father we say "...thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven". We are saying we want to live in a world where God's rules apply here and now: justice, peace, respect of each individual, care of His creation, protection of life. We say that our ruler is God. People in the past were martyred for saying this.

The government of our country has become more secular in its values but the origins of its Christian identity can be seen in the House of Commons' chamber, which used to be the Chapel of St Stephen until 1548. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He was killed by stoning by the people for his belief in Jesus. It is very poignant that the bravery of this saint's beliefs are remembered in that place. M.P.s bow as they enter the chamber, not to the Speaker, but to the place where the altar of the former chapel was and the sacrifice of the mass which took place daily.

We are lucky today in having a political system where each citizen has the right to vote for the candidate which best represents their views and we can (generally) have our opinions heard without persecution.



St Paul

"The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say "Here it is", because the Kingdom of God is in your midst." Jesus
Luke 17:20-21



Reconfiguration of chapel of St Stephen 1548

"What are kingdoms without justice? They're just gangs of bandits " St. Augustine