

*A different politics*

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning moves us on several weeks from the astounding events that we celebrated last Sunday, the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Much has happened, and yet certain things have not changed. Then, the disciples had scattered, threatened by the religious and political authorities of the day who were eager to round up the deluded followers of this Messianic pretender. Now, Jesus' followers are still in danger from the authorities. They are clearly under surveillance, being watched carefully. What has changed, however, is that they are no longer fearful, no longer frightened, no longer silenced, for there is a new boldness and confidence about them. They are no longer hiding but they are out in the streets, doing extraordinary things as they proclaim at the top of their voices that this Jesus who had been crucified had been raised from the dead. Christ's resurrection power is bursting out through them.

So, earlier on in this chapter 5 we read that 'many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles', with people bringing out the sick and the possessed to be healed. Amazing stuff – resurrection life invading the citadels of death. There then follow, however, these ominous words: 'Then the high priest took action...' Yes, the high priest took action alright, and we read that 'he and all who were with him were 'filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison'. In other words, what the disciples are doing, inevitably, provokes a backlash as the rule of the resurrected one clashes with the rule of the establishment. The Kingdom of Christ collides with the Empire. The politics of earth confront the politics of heaven, exactly as happened in the trial and execution of Jesus. Only now the disciples are no longer cowed and fearful - they stand firm.

So we find that by the time we come to our reading this morning the disciples have been arrested three times. It's like the prison has a revolving door. On the first occasion, when the authorities try to shut them up, Peter squares up to them and declares, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than God, you must be judge.' That is one polite, respectful, but firm put-down. And it is echoed now on this third occasion here in our reading where in response to the authorities' attempts to silence him Peter says, 'we must obey God rather than any human authority.' In other words we followers

of the raised Jesus Christ have an allegiance to a higher authority than yours. We disciples of the risen One acknowledge him as Lord and he is our ultimate authority before whom yours is penultimate. And when it came to a clash of loyalties, when it came to a stand-off between Christ's Kingdom and earthly rulers, there can only ever be one choice, no matter what the consequences.

Now, what is quite clear here from the disciples' clash with the authorities is that their proclamation that the risen Jesus Christ is Lord of all is political through and through. It is all about political power and authority and their limits. Think of it this way. Jesus, we recall, had been put to death by the Roman Empire, the greatest political power of its day. The Empire had sealed the tomb in which Jesus was laid and sentries had been posted outside it. And in rising from the dead Jesus was being shown to have trumped Roman power and authority. The seal on the tomb had been broken, the sentries scattered and Jesus - and not Caesar - had been shown to be Lord. So the proclamation of the risen Christ is not just a private matter, an affair of the heart - it belongs in the public square. No keeping of religion out of politics here. And when Jesus and Caesar clash, when the Kingdom collides with the Empire, then there can only be one outcome: 'we must obey God rather than any human authority'. And without that fundamental conviction there would have been no Martin Luther King standing up against the batons and the dogs and the fire hoses. And there would have been no Desmond Tutu and others in the anti-apartheid struggle facing arrest and imprisonment on account of the mandate of a higher authority. These are examples of a long-standing tradition of Christian dissent and civil disobedience, and it's a tradition that comes from faith in a risen Lord that over-rules the Empire and its politics.

Now, of course we have to be very careful about this. To claim to speak for God, to claim that a cause is God's, always runs the risk of taking God's name in vain. After all, both sides claimed a divine mandate in the American Civil war over slavery, and there was a time when the Dutch Reformed Church sanctioned apartheid in South Africa and doubtless both sides would have taken Peter's stand of 'we must obey God over any human authority'. Such a stance must never be made self-righteously or stridently but with humility and with fear and trembling lest God's name be taken in vain.

So, if 'Jesus Christ is the risen Lord' is a political claim that at least in principle invites civil disobedience and resistance, what are we to make of such a claim in our current context, in our world today on this first Sunday after

Easter Day? And I am not sufficiently familiar with the political situation in the Netherlands to comment but I am aware of the American Presidential election taking place at the moment, the outcome of which will affect us all, whoever wins, and I am aware of what is going on in the United Kingdom, and there does seem at the moment to be an extraordinary disillusionment with politics and the political process. It's been observed of the American election that so many people are so angry – angry with 'the establishment', especially among those who feel alienated and estranged from Washington and its élites. And it only takes a brash and strident politician who claims also to be outside 'the establishment' and who claims to speak for the angry to generate a tidal surge of support. And there seems to be a similar disillusionment taking place in the UK – less anger maybe, but still a disillusionment with 'the establishment' which is deemed to be out of touch. So there is growing support for anti-establishment figures from both the left and the right, often at the extremes, and I'm sure that phenomenon can be witnessed elsewhere in Europe, not least here - we're familiar, I expect, with the familiar rollcall of names and faces. There is deep cynicism and disillusionment around which is always in danger opening the door to tyrants and demagogues.

I wonder if the people of Jerusalem back there is the time of our reading felt equally jaded about the politics of their day. Did they regard the authorities as honest, decent people, doing their best against impossible odds? Or were they disenchanted and disgruntled with them? Was there any sense that things could actually change, or had people given up hope? Well, whatever the case, what is important here is that the disciples belonged to a different political community, where a different and more hopeful politics operated. As well as belonging to Jerusalem and Rome they belonged to a little community of the risen Lord where things were different and more hopeful. Let me explain. If we backtrack to chapter 2 of this Book of Acts we find a wonderful little passage which describes the life of these early Christians. It goes like this: 'all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their bread with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.' Now what does that passage reveal

about the politics of that little Christian community, founded on the risen Christ, the first church?

Well the first thing is that their authority was Jesus, the crucified Lord – Jesus, who had been executed in the most shameful and despised manner possible as a heretic and a subversive. There could hardly be anyone less ‘establishment’ than that. Donald trump eat your heart out! And under the rule of this Christ their life included worship at the temple, where they expressed their devotion to God and also their commitment to their nation and its traditions - they showed themselves to be loyal and respectful citizens. And this was also a generous community where the poor and the vulnerable were cared for, where there was redistribution from the haves to the have-nots as any had need. What a vision! What we have here is the emergence of an alternative community, the church, that operates with a different politics. It has a religious dimension to it for God and the risen Christ are at the centre of it all, but it is political through and through because it is all about how we live together justly and well. It is a community that is learning when to say, ‘we must obey God rather than human authority’. And it’s attractive and compelling such that we’re told that day by day more and more people are joining it.

This morning, as we have ordained a new elder, our thoughts turn to the church, to its structure, to its life, to its politics. Why are we here? What are we here for? Does the church matter or is it an irrelevance in our modern, secular world? Well, in this Easter season, we are directed to our beginnings in the early chapters of the Book of Acts. And we are reminded there that into the midst of this complex and confusing world, where politicians struggle with intractable problems and many people are disillusioned and angry, God has inserted this community. It is the community of the crucified and risen Lord who are learning to live by a different politics, the politics not of the Empire but of the kingdom. It is, believe it or not, God’s gift to the world and we are invited to be a part of it. Amen.

O gracious God,  
we pray today for those entrusted with power and authority,  
especially for governments and rulers and politicians.  
Help them we pray to rule justly and peaceably,  
that the world may be a place of fullness of life for all.  
Bless especially the government of this nation of the Netherlands and  
lead it in the paths of righteousness...  
And we pray for those who resist corrupt and tyrannical  
regimes, for those who are provoked to civil disobedience  
and defiance of unjust laws.  
We pray for all prisoners of conscience and all who  
suffer for their religious convictions.

Bring release to the captives, we pray.

And God, bless your church we pray.

Teach us we pray what it means to live as a community that lives under the rule of the crucified and risen Lord.

Today, as we ordain a new elder we pray for our Consistory, for those with responsibility for leadership of this church.

Grant tis u the mind and the wisdom of our Lord...

And as we consider our Church's mission we pray for the Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malawi which we support.

Bless Ruth Shakespeare its medical director and all the staff, and grant that it may be a place of healing, a hopeful place...

And as we gather here today around this table bless especially those unable to join us because of sickness or infirmity.

May they know by our love and care that they still belong here.

And in a moment of silence we bring before you our special concerns this morning, those things on our hearts that we would place into your hands...

Am we pray all these things in the name of our risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.