

Seeking the welfare of the City: The Role of the Church in turbulent times.

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We stand at an important moment in not just our nation's history but in Europe's history. There have been few others in our lifetime which have been more dramatic, polarising, or unsettling. But, of course, division is not new.

Historically, we have found ourselves to have unbearable, seemingly irreconcilable, differences before, and no doubt we will again.

In a report "Democracy and the Common Good" by Dr Adrian Pabst, produced last year with the St Paul's Institute, our use of binary narratives is challenged.

Dr Adrian Pabst, in his preface, reminds us that following the Brexit referendum and the political turmoil in the USA, the UK and many European countries: "the old opposition of left versus right seems increasingly obsolete."

Instead, he says, "we risk substituting one binary world for another - one in which the main fault lines are cultural and generational, encapsulated by the networked metropolitan youth versus the old 'left behind'."

The report calls for "a politics and a broad public discourse based on a different language and a transcendent conversation - one that can address deeper discussions around questions of meaning, identity and belonging."

At the heart of the Christian faith is the sense of belonging, identity and meaning as being made in the image of God – The Imago Dei. It is a concept I would like to suggest could contribute to our **welfare** as individuals and wider society in **turbulent** times.

Welfare according to the Oxford English Dictionary equates to the health, happiness, and fortunes of a person or group. I want to suggest to you this evening that one of the causes of our "**turbulence**" is the "politicisation of life." And it is the Christian concept of being "made in the image of God." That could be the tonic.

Not just in Europe but across America we have seen the growth in the idea that a particular set of political beliefs are the solution to the world's problems. One of the implications of politicisation is that by definition you are either on the "right side" of the argument or the "wrong side."

Our news outlets speak through the lens of politics e.g. Daily Telegraph on the right and The Guardian on the left and we begin to speak of them being on the "right side" and the "wrong side."

The news itself is framed in terms of whose political ideas are "winning" and whose political ideas are "losing" - who is right and who is wrong.

In the Government's definitions of what a good school and a good curriculum look like, these definitions are enshrined in law by the governing party of the day - there is a "right" way and a "wrong" way - often only to be dismantled when another party finds its way into power.

Our narrative of right and wrong creates a culture of winners and losers and the Punch and Judy politics that we say we want to get away from and yet still see week by week at Prime Minister's Question Time.

Prime Minister's Question Time is a forum that reportedly made Harold McMillan, a man who fought on the Somme, feel physically sick as he prepared for it.

Prime Minister's Question Time, a forum that apparently still gives Tony Blair an icy chill at noon every Wednesday.

The problem with politicisation is that because we believe that political beliefs are the solution, the resulting atmosphere becomes divided and depressing. The division means that there is little incentive to cooperate or to even attempt to appeal to voters in the other party. And there is a constant expectation of denigration by those who oppose you.

It's also depressing because the reality is that our expectations are never quite met. Education is never quite good enough. Finances are never quite rosy enough. Health care is never quite delivering enough.

David Mitchell in the Guardian described the way our political parties relate as "sincere enmity" adding that "the current system in which ... MPs deserting either cause are condemned as traitors, is dysfunctional in the extreme."

There are ripples in wider society and community. The belief that I am right and you are wrong can so easily slide into being - I am good and you are bad. Hate speak can so easily move to violent isolation of those who hold different views.

We inevitably hunker down with our own and, in consolidating our sense of belonging within our own communities - of whatever kind - we differentiate ourselves from others, setting ourselves apart.

The Church is not exempt. We can use language which not everyone may understand. We have sometimes been quick to form different Christian tribes. We have too often shut out doors to those we should have flung them open to. And as we do we draw explicit and implicit categories which indicate who is 'in' and who is 'out'.

Our challenge in this time is not to pretend that we are all alike. We clearly are not. But to recognise, and hopefully learn in some small way to overcome, our intrinsic nature which pushes away others and tries to carve out territory only for ourselves and to see our context in the wider context of God.

Our challenge is that given that politicisation has failed so spectacularly, we need to find a place for humility about where a way forward might lie.

It has been suggested that "perhaps the single most influential text in Western political history." (Nick Spencer) has been The Imago Dei.

Imago Dei ("image of God") is a theological term, applied uniquely to humans, which denotes the symbolical relation between God and humanity. The term has its roots in Genesis 1:27, wherein Genesis 1.26-27 – "... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them,"

This scriptural passage does not mean that we are carbon copies of God but rather, that humans reflect God, are in the image of God, in their moral, spiritual, and intellectual nature.

Nick Spencer of the Theos Think Tank suggests that the most important, identifiable, recognisable thing that people can be grateful for Christianity for is the image they see when they look in the mirror in the morning. What are you seeing there?

It is by no means self-evident. You don't have a barcode on you that tells you how much you're worth. You don't have a barcode on you that tells you anything about your intrinsic identity. The idea of who the human is, someone rather than something, a someone irrespective of the fact they may not be able to afford a mirror to look into in the morning, they are not self-evident ideas. And it was the incursion of Christianity into what we call now the classical world that brought about ideas that in engaging with human beings you are in some way engaging with a bit of God, with an image of God.

This text has been used repeatedly and powerfully through history to justify human equality and dignity. In fact it is the soil in which they have flourished.

Firstly, it is the image of God which creates an understanding of the equality of humanity, puts care for the weak at the centre of spiritual and political life - the poor, widows, orphans, sick, imprisoned, and the enemy.

It is this text which inspired William Wilberforce to campaign for the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. There have been dissenting and discordant voices but the overall picture puts care for and respect for the weak - as of paramount importance. Why? Because we are made in the image of God.

It's striking that 2000 years ago, the man who claimed to be the king in whose image we are made, modelled this perfectly. Jesus was not ashamed to turn aside from great debate - debates about who was right and who was wrong – and turn to care for and respect the poor, the blind, the lame and the marginalised.

It is within this concept with the equality of humanity at the centre that we find that we can disagree with our ideological positions with care and respect.

Wouldn't it be great if you could hold what is considered a minority opinion without being ridiculed or vilified as a traitor or troublemaker?

Wouldn't it be a breath of fresh air - if the tone of our debates focussed less on showing people how right we are and more on how to care for those most vulnerable, most likely to be hurt?

This is the "fruit" of believing that we are made in the image of God - a care for the weak and there is another.

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Secondly, by being made in the image of God creates the equality of humanity which leads to a championing of individual freedom.

It was this text that spurred John Locke to argue that government should not enforce their views on the people unwillingly, but only with their consent.

There have been dissenting and discordant voices. But the overall picture is that Christianity offers a way of structuring society that does not demand that everyone agree or become a Christian. It offers a soil for our political life that allows other ideological flowers to bloom.

It's striking that the man who claimed to be king in whose image we are made, 2000 years ago, modelled this. Jesus did not come by force to dictate what his subjects should believe, but allowed them to mock and vilify and even kill him.

So with the teaching of Christ, the teaching of the equality of humanity at the centre, we have a stable base for those who hold to these views **and** those who hold to completely different ones to flourish. A way to avoid a culture in which we demonise each other for dissent and to allow the safe space we need for all views to be expressed and debated in an atmosphere of compassion and respect.

This is the “fruit” of believing that we are made in the image of God - a care for the weak and a championing of individual freedom. These are the roots on which our society has been built and I would suggest needs to revisit.

The Church teaches that Jesus Christ empowers us to do this. The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky said “Can man be good without God?” His answer was that God’s forgiveness not only gives us access to personal communion with God but also empowers to live out renewed community relationships. To care for the weak and be patient with those with whom we disagree.

Yes we fail. And yet he helps us act justly and love mercy - until the day when he himself does what we can never fully achieve. When he remakes a world with perfect justice in a place of complete respect and we get to walk humbly with him.

And yet whether you agree or not. I contend that it is the message that Jesus gives us about the image of God that provides the soil for a different kind of politics.

So where does this leave us? The reality is that no-one seriously entertains that politics “owes everything to Christianity” on the one hand or that politics “owes everything to escaping Christianity” on the other. But what if we allowed the image of God rather than politicisation to be at the central ideal of our city?

Wouldn’t it be a breath of fresh air - to move beyond the binary punch and Judy of modern day life? Of winners and losers. Not just as a political stunt but as a principled position?

And if this principle were actually true - if it could really affect the health, happiness, and fortunes of the whole nation, would it not be worth exploring?

I will end with words from the prophet Jeremiah:

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah 29:7