

29th Sunday Ordinary Time (a)

The Christian and politics is a subject that is destined to cause many an argument; *'religion and politics do not mix'* is the saying. This episode from the life of Jesus according to Matthew continues the description of the ongoing, escalating friction between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees had concluded that *'this man who teaches with authority'* was a threat to their authority and their perceived importance in society.

Jesus had come with a message of God's universal love; God's love was lavished on Jew and Gentile alike; God had no favourites. Those in authority in Jewish society, the Pharisees, interpreted this message as a political one, and one that posed a threat to them. Jesus, on the other hand, always maintained that his mission was religious; it was to reveal the true meaning of the Law of Moses as being a Law of Love. He had come *'not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it'*.

Jesus never played politics! The Pharisees attempted to trap him into making a political statement; they tried to twist his words of universal love into a statement condemning the Romans -- the occupying landlords of the Jewish people: *'Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'* The trap was set, ready to be sprung; the answer was: *'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar -- and to God what belongs to God.'*

Jesus had no issue with the legitimate taxes of the State. His mission contained a message beyond the boundaries of any state. A government that suppresses the human rights of an individual and, by so doing, denies their equality before God, stands condemned by the message of Jesus. In this sense, the Christian message of God's universal love will always present a challenge to political institutions; it is in this sense that Christians are political. Any political institution that does not accord every one of its citizens equal dignity and equal human rights loses its right to political authority and respect by its citizens.

It is the Christian responsibility of every person to live by, and proclaim their Christian values. As Christians we should be proud of our faith and its values. Our faith in God assures us that God loves every person. Our task is to live in such a manner that we clearly show our respect for the dignity of every person. The sincerity of our proclaimed values will be demonstrated in our willingness to publicly work to change societies where human rights and human dignity are not respected.

Being political should not be automatically construed as denoting a person as following the 'party line' of a particular party. The adjective 'politic' describes someone as being 'wise, prudent, judicious' about the affairs of people. It should be a compliment to be so addressed. Yet our recent history in Australia has left us with a legacy of using 'political' as a term of derision.

As an official minister of the Church, it is my responsibility to present the moral and social issues of our day in the light of the Bible and the Tradition of the Church. It is not my right to tell you what political party to vote for. It is my duty to attempt to enlighten your decision according to the principles of Jesus. Our social teaching is rich and totally Christian. We should be vocal on issues dealing with the environment; the plight of the First People; the demoralising effects of long-term unemployment; the poverty trap for single-parent families; discrimination based on race, sex or creed; the quality of life for senior citizens; the moral issues of wealth and materialism; the use of nuclear energy.

The current debate on the vote on marriage equality is another case of Christians being in the forefront of political issues. Read Archbishop Coleridge's statement. Read Bishop Vincent Long's (Parramatta) statement. See the views expressed by Fr Frank Brennan SJ a constitutional lawyer. Make up your mind according to facts, not according to extreme arguments put up by some of the protagonists on either side of the campaign.

Jesus was political in the broadest sense of the word. When people suffered or were disadvantaged in society because they were poor, female, a sinner, a foreigner, he publicly preached the dignity and the equality of all people in God's love. This religious statement was political in that it challenged the present order of society. It is, in this way, that we too must give an example to the world of the living of our Christian faith in Jesus.

Fr John Scarrott

Bishop Long's Pastoral Letter:

<https://catholicoutlook.org/bishop-vincent-pastoral-letter-sex-marriage-postal-survey/>

Fr Frank Brennan SJ:

<https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=53983>