

Law-ed over us

Psalm 24; Mark 12:38-44

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It is all a bit political, you know...I mean these Bible stories, of course. So I thought I'd start with the definition of 'political' from that great, higher source – Wikipedia.

Political is an ADJECTIVE which means: relating to the government or public affairs of a country.

But when it is used as a derogatory description, it is something that is ...'done or acting in the interests of status or power within an organization rather than as a matter of principle.'

I chose Psalm 24 because of the Climate Change Summit in Glasgow.

¹The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
²for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.

Glasgow certainly looks like bread and circuses from here and yet, we are all aware of the importance of this meeting. A lot more aware than we probably have been of any other 25 COP meetings. I suppose I should comfort you in that it is not just photo opportunities for heads of State.

People like Geoff, hardworking public servants from a variety of government departments, arrive days before the journalists. Over a couple of weeks of hard negotiation sessions, official and unofficial, into the wee hours, they would hash out the agreements that their leaders were *most likely* to sign when they turn up for their moment before the cameras.

On the sidelines are lobbyists, non-profits, academics and protestors, all trying to have an impact on the decision-making. There are information booths; seminars and closed briefings. COP conferences are like swans. You see the leaders gliding across the surfaces with the cameras flashing but underneath, there's midnight oil, agitated movement and sometimes whiskey and wine. The Glasgow summit has attracted around 40,000 people to town.

These meetings don't happen very often and so it comes to be that a government (like Australia) can sign up to something and then change their political leaders – like Turnbull to Abbott – and the new leaders don't

necessarily agree with what the nation has signed up for. But these agreements are supposed to be bigger than a leader and longer lasting than a government.

After all, we cannot run our international relations on an election cycle – can we? Or so I thought, until the last five years.

It does seem things have changed. The eyes of the world are on Glasgow. The youth are holding their breath praying for a unified, concerted effort to save the world we live in. My grandson believes that he will raise his children in a post-industrial, dystopian world with little left to save. His anxiety at 14 is through the roof. He honestly believes that...and our leaders(and media) are to blame.

Today, I pray for the negotiators in Glasgow. And I pray for our youth who do not trust us enough to change. Which makes our reading today very appropriate.

³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” (Mark 12:38-40)

Politics – done or acting in the interests of status or power within an organization rather than as a matter of principle.’

And thus, it was always so...

Remember last week, I said that chaplains read the same texts but see different stories in the Bible? Well, I wasn’t kidding.

Let’s turn to the Widow’s offering (Mark 12:41-44). You have heard this passage used every year as an illustration of generosity. Sermons designed to urge you dig deeper and increase your financial support to the church. (which, is not a bad idea, if you want to take up the opportunity, I’m sure the treasurer will be delighted).

In sermon after sermon, we are told the Lord treasures and celebrates the widow's generosity and demonstrates how valued it is to her (and so, to God) in the pain of what she gives.

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

She gave everything she has to live on. I don't see this as a celebration. Read this sentence again with the voice of irony. Because I believe there is a reason why the warning about the scribes and the law comes before the widow's story and why they should be read together.

These passages come at the very end of the Jesus public ministry. In the next pages, he foretells the destruction of the Temple. And then, right after that, he rides to Jerusalem and the passion narrative begins. There are several stories between now and his death designed to emphasise the corruption of the Temple and the religious authority's growing opposition to Jesus. Ultimately corruption leads to destruction, as it did then and hundreds of years later, in the reformation¹.

Remember the root word for Protestant is *Protest*. I can hear Luther banging on the door...

When too much power is located in the authorities – church or otherwise, they will most likely act in their own self-interest. If coal, gas or gambling² fund governments – there is no way it will turn against its own interests. If Rome supports the Temple authorities – there is no way they will act against their own interests. They must act against this new 'king' or at least, not be seen to support him.

So while you were being told beautiful stories of love and sacrifice and the holiness of the widow, I saw a woman victimised. Forced to give more than she could afford by an oppressive regime. And worse, exploited as an example. Jesus was pointing to the very authorities who were supposed to care for her as they were exploiting and abusing a vulnerable person.

¹ And has for several governments throughout history

² Recently two state governments found casinos unworthy of a license – and still allowed them to operate

This is a prophetic call to look at the contradictions between our institutions and what we believe they are supposed to do.

I may have told you about my visit to a cathedral in Mexico City. My apologies if you have heard this before but it is burnt on my retinas.

A left over from the Catholic priests who came with the conquistadors, people were led to believe their prayers would be heard if accompanied with gold. Today, you can still buy a wafer of gold at the door. As you pray, you paste the wall. All of the walls and the ceiling are paved with wafers purchased by destitute farmers praying to have their children educated; or to be able to keep their farms; or to feed their families through the next season. The farmers still travel all the way to the city to pray in that cathedral because they believe that is where God listens. I looked at the golden walls and wept.

She gave more because she had no choice. To live outside the community was unthinkable.

I know our society needs scribes and lawyers (priests, politicians and bureaucrats). So don't get me wrong. I love law. I spent a good part of my life up to my ears. It has a place in civil society and the good order of our church. It is supposed to be the checks and balances that keep us straight but it is not the be-all, trust me.

It is important that we understand a little about the difference between the law and the Gospel.³ Just as Jesus tried to teach us about the difference between ritual, law and faith.

The law is almost always an *if* and *then* proposition. *If* you litter – then you will be fined. *If* you follow all the rules in the Bible *then* God will love you and you will be happy. *If* you go to church every Sunday *then* you are a good Christian. *If* you never have a racist or sexist or homophobic thought *then* you will be worthy of calling other people out on *their* racism and sexism and homophobia.

If we treat the law as if it will save us – as if it is Gospel, then we will not flourish. We will only do what is right because we are afraid. If we see it like that *then* we will fail. There are only two options: pride and despair and both

³ Here, I borrow generously from the writings of Nadia Boltz-Webber's sermon on Reformation Sunday. That is the celebration of when Martin Luther nailed his grievances to the church door in the 16th century

are destructive. We live by 'shoulds' and either irritate the heck out of others with our sinful pride or sink into the despair of never being perfect enough.

But the Gospel is different. The gospel is not an if-then proposition. It is because....

Because God loves God's creation, God refuses to let our sin and brokenness and our inability to always do the right things, to be the last word...

because God came to save and not to judge ...

you are saved by grace as a gift and not by the works of the law.

This truth will set you free like no self-help can do⁴.

Most of us don't litter but we don't because it is the right thing, because it is our gift to the place we love...not because of the law.

And so, I pray for the lobbyists, the bureaucrats working late and the Heads of State parading in their fine robes. I pray that they will come to Glasgow agreements *because* they love their children and the earth that God made as our playground. And I pray for the vulnerable (the widow) who will pay the biggest price for global warming.

And I do so because I believe in God's gifts and God's grace.

Amen.

⁴ Once again, thank you Nadia Boltz-Webber – clearly paraphrased but 99% her's