

The Plight of the Prophets – Trinity 17 (8/10/17) – Matthew 21: 33-46

It's often said that you shouldn't mix politics and religion. No doubt you've often heard this – it's a common piece of folk wisdom. Curiously, though, this maxim goes against the whole grain and tenor of the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testament. Again and again we see the prophets and the Lord Jesus bringing the spheres of religion and politics together. How could it be otherwise? For insofar as religion is based on moral and spiritual teaching, it cannot be separated from the values and ethical principles that direct our everyday lives.

Jesus comments on Jewish history with wry and caustic humour. He notes in the Gospel set for today that the Jewish prophets – the nation's great teachers and visionaries – generally met with scorn and derision, imprisonment and abuse, and even execution. Why, we might ask, were they treated so badly? Quite simply because they criticised the wickedness and corruption of the ruling élite and promoted compassionate care for the poor, vulnerable and needy. This was not what the rich, ruling élite wanted to hear.

We might recall that back in the 8th BCE, the First Isaiah and his fellow prophet Amos warned the people of the Jewish Northern Kingdom - known as Ephraim – that if their leaders didn't turn from idolatry, indolence, corruption and oppression of the poor, then they would grow weak, and lay themselves open to invasion from the Assyrians. Tragically, the leaders ignored the warnings, and this is exactly what happened. The fate of the Northern Kingdom is evocatively recalled in the dramatic words of Lord Byron's poem, *The Destruction of Sennacherib*: "The Assyrians came down like the wolf on the fold,/ And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;/ and the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,/ When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee". King David's mighty united kingdom of Israel was no more. Isaiah and Amos had warned that this would be so, but the wealthy leaders scoffed at them.

Likewise, in the 6th BCE the prophet Jeremiah warned the wicked King Jehoiachin that unless he mended his ways, Judah (the Southern Kingdom) would fall to Babylon. The King rewarded this 'impudence' by trying to have the prophet killed. As is made clear in Jesus's parable, the landowner (God the Father) sends his slaves (the prophets) to teach the people wise precepts and to gather a harvest of good souls. So often, though, they were ridiculed, abused, mistreated, killed...As Jesus asserts with grim and accurate objectivity, the same fate awaits the Landowner/God's own son – that is, himself. The tenants – the people of Judea, and in particular, their leaders – rejected, plotted against him, and had him killed. This is the fate of many who stand up against oppression and injustice. We might call to mind the fate of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and Bishop Helder Camara of Brazil, to name but a few. Theirs is a stand called for in every age – to defend the poor and weak against selfish and greedy ruling élites; to point out lies and contradictions; and to speak out courageously on behalf of God's marginalized peoples.

Such a stand is also called for today. At present, for example, this country faces an appalling housing crisis, a disgraceful situation for a supposedly civilised nation to find itself in. Rents have become exorbitant, and as a consequence there are hundreds of thousands of homeless people. Especially hard hit are young people and the poor, but also in recent years many working people have been affected by the crisis, as rents have spiralled beyond their means. This parlous situation calls for action.

Clearly local councils are failing to meet their responsibilities, and have sunk to placing financial targets above humanitarian concern. Just this week I heard a programme on the radio about Redbridge Council. They had come up with housing a family of four (working parents with two young children) in an upper room of a derelict, boarded-up pub near Manor Park. The room had filthy walls and tattered net curtains, and the family had to share a bathroom and kitchen with other 'temporary' residents, some of whom were drug users. Amazingly, Redbridge Council is charging the family £900 pcm plus Council Tax (a total of £1,000 pcm) to live in these conditions. And these are the so-called 'lucky ones', as many cannot even get into such accommodation, having to camp out in cars and vans.

Faced with this crisis, Christians need to stand up and be counted. We need to demand that the Government does a very great deal to address this situation. Conference pledges are not enough. Real deeds are called for.

As the Old Testament prophets knew, a godly society cares for those in need, and a society's level of compassion is gauged by the way it treats its poorest and most vulnerable members. If we claim to be Gospel people, then such care is essential. Given this perspective, how can we separate religion and politics? It's impossible so to do. Such neglect would make our religion irrelevant.

A barrage of petitions would be a starting point, calling upon government and local councils to address the appalling housing crisis. We need also to write to councillors and MP's, urging them to tackle this situation with the utmost urgency. Our faith should energize us to oppose abuse. Standing up for the needy and disadvantaged may not make us popular. This should not trouble us, however; for we will have the vindication of knowing that we are heeding the Bible's prophetic call, and above all that we are striving to put into action our Lord Jesus Christ's Gospel of compassion.

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