

Shining the Light of Christ in a Divisive Age

Readings

Matthew 5.13-20

Opening

In 1905 a London newspaper hired G.K. Chesterton to write a weekly column. His editors said he could write on any topic he wished except religion and politics. Chesterton replied, “There is nothing else worth writing about.”¹

Clearly I am comfortable, like Chesterton, speaking on matters of religion, but I have not shared his interest speaking on politics. Oh I’ve wrestled with God a lot on this one. I’m not a priest who wants to be at the forefront of these discussions. Follow me on Facebook or Twitter the past few years about these things and you’ll be bored. Yet I can’t shake the sense that God has been preparing me over several months, years even, to offer substantial pastoral guidance on the political divisions of our time.

Which is why I really sympathize with the Jonah story. Jonah wanted a ticket for Tarsish and there’s a part of me that just wants a plane ticket for Ft Myers, FL if the Lord wants me to address American politics. That’s where the Red Sox report for Spring Training this week. Florida sun in February, spring baseball, and forget the fact that our nation and Christians, too, suffer deep divisions from our political convictions.

And yet I can’t hide from the themes of Scripture the past few months. On recent Sundays we’ve been reading prophets like Amos and Micah. Jesus summons disciples onto the field

¹ Dale Ahlquist, *G.K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense*, 13.

of action. In the Daily Office readings, we've heard Jeremiah declare God's judgment on the idolatries of his beloved people. In 1 Corinthians Paul addresses factions in the church when Christians said, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas." Sound familiar? Then Paul asks "Is Christ divided?"

So these have been the daily readings in our ears, minds, and hearts this January. And then we come to church on Sunday in February and our church guides us to read Jesus' command, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Your righteousness *must* exceed the scribes and the Pharisees." All those things are saying, 'it's time.'

It's time to face the topic of our Christian witness in the current state of American politics. I'd rather preach on the inner life, but the rancor of American politics troubles our souls. I'd rather preach on family and friendships, but politics has wounded family relationships and friendships. Church attendance was affected during the last presidential election like never before. I saw this pattern much more beyond Apostles than within, but we weren't immune. People attended worship less and, in some cases, left their churches. And yes, news articles and Facebook threads became factors in people's presence in worship or commitment to their church.

I am *not* addressing these topics because of impeachment proceedings. I am not speaking in cryptic or coded speech today. If you are trying to figure out where I'm voting or how I hope people will vote, you will have missed my pastoral guidance today. I refuse to tell you how you should vote because that would betray my ordination as a priest and the prophetic office I share in Christ's Church. This is *not* an election year sermon, though I pray my words would aid your discernment regarding electoral choices this year. Our political divisions have been building for many years, decades even, and they are likely to be with us for much longer. If we are going to be the light of the world in this time of darkness, we must go deep into the Scriptures.

Jesus said he came not to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. He said that if we relax his commandments we will be least in the kingdom. He said our righteousness had to *exceed* scribes and Pharisees. They knew the Bible inside and out. But Jesus didn't

say they had to *know* more than the Bible scholars. He said they had to *live* the commandments with greater holiness than the scribes and Pharisees.

Now in the first century, Pharisees and scribes were not only religious parties, but political factions of their time. ² These were only a few factions among several—like Sadducees and Zealots—seeking political influence to guide Israel into freedom from Roman captivity.

And what does Jesus say in this politically charged environment? Live the commandments. Which means you have to *know* the commandments, not just the Ten, but the fullness of his moral instruction in the Law, the Five Books of Moses. You have to listen to the prophets in their fullness to hear how, when, and to whom God speaks judgment. You have to read the prophets' solemn and stern words of judgment to hear how they prophesy a coming age of hope and new creation. You have to learn how all the Law and Prophets are fulfilled in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It takes *work* to be biblically faithful. It takes *time* to be biblically faithful. It involves your intellect, of repenting and thinking anew when God the Holy Spirit reveals your thinking doesn't align with Scripture and those he has trusted with Scripture, the Church. But even more than your intellect, biblical faithfulness means obedience with your heart and habits. "Let your light shine; let your righteousness exceed the scribes and Pharisees."

Jesus is **not** apolitical. He's a King. He's *the* King of Kings. Jesus is not a liberal, not a conservative, not even a moderate. All that stuff is so very small compared with the majesty of the Kingdom of God. I'm not saying political theories and their policies are irrelevant or unimportant. These discussions *are* important and I study these topics often. But we cannot force fit the Kingdom of God inside political philosophies formed by fallen human beings.

Jesus' Kingdom is not *of* this world. His Kingdom is *for* this world, as NT Wright has said, but his Kingdom is not *from* world. Jesus is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. So while we're here quoting good Anglicans, let me take this moment for our regularly scheduled C.S. Lewis quotation, one of our favorites. Remember in the *Chronicles of Narnia* when Lucy

² Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God.* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992, 189.

asked if the lion Aslan was safe? The response to Lucy was: "Safe? No, he's not safe. But he's good."

Oh, we've cherished that little story for our inner lives and struggles with trials, but let me tell you, it works in politics, too.

The Political Nature of the Kingdom

In America, we've heard about the separation of church and state all our lives. I firmly believe that order is good and wise for both the church and the state. But in affirming the separation of church and state, we've become confused about our public witness as Christians regarding the political and moral issues of our day.

We simply cannot avoid the political nature of the Bible. If you want a Bible without politics, you have to take scissors and cut out the Law, the Prophets, this Sermon on the Mount, the Book of Revelation, and more. Don't do that. That's heresy.

Furthermore, we'd have to drastically alter our liturgy if we took politics out of our faith. The Nicene Creed is perhaps the most political moment of every Sunday. We confess Jesus ascended into heaven and reigns right now over heaven and earth. We would also have to stop praying the Lord's Prayer. We pray 'thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.' And we would also have to stop baptizing babies and adults. Baptism is initiation into the kingdom of God. I'll come back to baptism later, but for now, let's recognize that baptism makes an eternal claim over a person's life stronger than any nation, any tribe, even the child's birth family.

The great problem in our time is that we have equated the word 'political' with 'partisan.' They are **not** the same. To be political means that our faith is not only private or personal, it is social. Our faith teaches that matters of public life, our common life, and human governments matters to God and matters to us. That is Scripture from the Gospels through the Epistles into Revelation. The Book of Revelation is pretty clear that Jesus is not apolitical when all of heaven shouts: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord

and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”³

To be partisan is very, very different. Partisan politics, especially in our time, requires allegiance to an entire platform of issues, a chosen nominee or candidate, and solidarity *against* the opposing party. Partisan politics fights hard for power and deteriorates into political turf wars for Congress and the White House. How do you reconcile earthly political power with “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth?”

Our Lord Jesus Christ preached those words and his Sermon on the Mount in Galilee. You know who else had a following of disciples in Galilee? The Zealot party—the most revolutionary party in Jesus’ time—had a major stronghold in Galilee.⁴ And Jesus was not a Zealot, nor a Pharisee, nor a Sadducee. He is the Prophet-Priest-King bringing a kingdom not from this world. Jesus was crucified because he proclaimed his Kingdom in an era of heavily partisan politics. /

Yet we live in the 21st century, not the first century. We need guidance from biblical, orthodox voices near to our time, too. T.S. Eliot was a faithful Anglican who wrote very well about how a Christian society—not a theocracy—but a Christian society, may flourish.

Eliot wrote these words in 1939 just before the world went to war for the second time in the 20th century. Though Christians labor for a society where the purposes of God may flourish, Eliot said:

the Church cannot be, in any (partisan) sense, either conservative, liberal, or revolutionary. Conservatism is too often conservation of the wrong things; liberalism a relaxation of discipline; revolution a denial of the permanent things. ⁵

When Christians become heavily partisan in their politics, the salt of the earth loses its taste; the light of the world grows dim. So if you tell people they can’t be Christians if they vote

³ Revelation 11.15

⁴ Bradley T. Johnson and Jonathon Lookadoo, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, 2016.

⁵ T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, 1939, 94-97. Quoted in Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*.

for (fill in the bank—I'm not even suggesting a name), then the lights go out. If you say, 'if you're a Christian, you'll vote for (fill in the blank),' the lights go out.

I get it, you may find conservative, moderate, or liberal positions on issues or candidates extremely compelling. But be careful about your allegiance to political parties and candidates. Because your citizenship belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven.

This does not mean some form of bland neutrality on moral or political issues. Practically speaking, Eliot believed neutrality on moral and political issues would not last long in a society.⁶ Instead of neutrality, I believe Christians must discern and bear witness about moral issues *more than* focusing on a single party or candidate.

A Light for Our Times

This is all really heavy stuff, so let's exhale for a moment. And let me remind you that, in my flesh, I'd prefer to live in different times. I hadn't thought about this until recent weeks but I looked back on my ministry as an Anglican priest in light of American politics. I realized that I was ordained an Anglican priest in August 2008, three months before Barack Obama was elected president. Which means that my entire priesthood as an Anglican in America has occurred during the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. I think it's safe to say these two presidents stir the most passionate feelings in the modern era, whether you're for or against them. Sometimes I wish I could have been a priest during the administration of, let's say, Calvin Coolidge. And you might be wondering, "what happened during the Coolidge administration?" Exactly. Not much. A relatively peaceful time in American life.

But you and I weren't born in another era. We are an outpost of the Kingdom of God in 21st century America, a secular age and an era of political hostilities. The commands of the Sermon on the Mount come down the mountain into the ordinary streets where you and I live. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your righteousness the scribes and Pharisees.

⁶ Ibid., 234. Russell Kirk summaries Eliot's political convictions here

How We Become Salt and Light: Seven Principles

In the earliest centuries of the Church, an unknown writer wrote a letter to a man named Diognetus who asked questions about the Christian faith. Some believe Diognetus was a politician. Our unknown saint replied in this manner regarding Christians:

They live, each in his native land—but as though they were not really at home there. They share in all duties like citizens and suffer all hardships like strangers. Every foreign land is for them a fatherland and every fatherland a foreign land...

In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is distributed in every member of the body, and Christians are scattered in every city in the world. The soul dwells in the body, and yet it is not of the body. So, Christians live in the world, but they are not of the world.⁷

This is our heritage as Christians. The saints' righteousness exceeded that of scribes and Pharisees; their light shines across two thousand years. I read about the faithful witness of our fathers and mothers in faith and I think about the words of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy who said, "He who suffers, wins in politics. The martyr does not obtain the victory personally, but his successors win in the long run."⁸

With the long run in mind, I would like to offer 7 principles for Anglicans to shine the light of Christ in divisive political times.

1. In all matters, Anglican Christians will be governed by Holy Scripture first and foremost; they will seek to read Scripture daily, deeply, thoroughly, in community

⁷ The Apostolic Fathers, *The Fathers of the Church*. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 1.

⁸ Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution: A Biography of Western Man*.

with one another and the communion of saints; regarding questions or unclear matters, they seek for Scripture to interpret Scripture first.

2. Jesus' Great Commandment—to love God and love one's neighbor—will govern their reading of Scripture. They will always read Scripture prayerfully, with a spirit of confession and lamentation; humility and faith; joy and hope.
3. They will seek the tradition of the church on moral issues, especially the scriptural interpretation and witness of the early Church revealed through her saints and martyrs.
4. They will honor the unity and consensus of their Church (provided she speaks from biblical orthodoxy) when the Church speaks with one voice on moral issues. Where the Church *has not* spoken with one voice on certain issues, they will be slow to speak, and will speak with humility and love for one another.
5. They will neither ignore or 'walk on eggshells' about moral or political issues, nor will they trample one another with words regarding another's political convictions.
6. They will observe the rule of St James when discerning moral issues: "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1.19). Jesus' Great Commandment and the Rule of St James will be the filters for any engagement or posting on social media.
7. They will gather each Sunday in Eucharistic fellowship to eat one bread and drink one cup as they proclaim with one voice: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ is coming again.

Who We Are: Prophet, Priest, and King

You know who we are baptized to be? Prophets, priests, and kings. In our baptism, we anoint babies and new Christians with oil in the sign of the cross after they are washed with water. Just like they anointed prophets, priests, and kings in the Old Testament. It's a sign that we share in the prophetic, priestly, and royal ministry of Jesus. As a church we say to the newly baptized, "We receive you into the fellowship of the Church. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in the royal priesthood of all his people."

As his priestly people, we seek God's Kingdom first and foremost through prayer and worship.

As his prophetic people, we proclaim in word and action the eternal truths of God's Word for our times, no matter the cost.

As his royal people, we pursue wisdom and mercy in any area of responsibility God has given us in His world.

Where We Go From Here

So what can we do today as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven? We will confess the Nicene Creed: our total allegiance to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit above any human power. And then we will pray the Great Litany, one of the best Anglican forms of prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Our first calling as his priestly people is worship and prayer. So we will pray in an attitude of confession and repentance; we will pray for the President, for all in civil authority; for judges; for our enemies.

Speaking of old Anglican traditions, this Sunday has an interesting name: Septuagesima. It means 'seventy days' before Easter. It's basically a countdown to Lent so we begin to get ready.

Here's how we're getting ready for Lent. We will offer a study on Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King during Lent. We're going to study these themes because that's how we learn how to be his faithful prophetic, priestly, royal people in our time, in this city. It's important enough that we will offer this study on Sundays and Wednesdays during Lent.

But beginning *today*, I ask that you read the Daily Office Lectionary with particular attention to the Old Testament and Psalms reading. In fact, I *plead* with each person to read the Daily Office readings and pray the Psalms every day from now through Easter. We're in the middle of Jeremiah, but I hope that you'll read the first 30 chapters or so to catch up.

Judgment, Lament, Wisdom

The Catholic theologian Romano Guardini, a man well before his time, anticipated a coming crisis in our modern world. Guardini anticipated a collapse of what it means to be human; of rule by the strong; of a culture that rejects Christianity. He wrote about this coming crisis in 1956. He perceived that in such a world, ‘the Old Testament will take on new significance.’ For the Old Testament is the record when the Living God renders judgment on the idols, powers, and ‘pagan rulers of life.’ This is the age when the obedient saints appear with total loyalty to the covenant relationship with God.⁹

Over the next 70 days, the Daily Office progresses from Jeremiah to Lamentations to Proverbs. I think that progression prepares us this year to become the Lord’s prophetic-priestly-kingly people. Jeremiah declares **judgement, then hope**, his Lamentations teach us **confession and lament**, and when you’ve walked through judgment and lament, you’re ready to learn wisdom—Proverbs. Judgment and lament, then wisdom. That’s the daily journey I want us to take in Scripture over the next 70 days.

For Our Children’s Sake

I have preached too long today. Which means I have one more thing to say. I expect that we will live with these tensions for many years. Suffering may come. If God wills it, so be it. We do not labor for temporary or partisan victories. Our politics is vastly different. We baptize babies to be prophets and priests, royal sons and daughters of the King. “He who suffers, wins in politics. The martyr does not obtain the victory personally, but his successors win in the long run.”¹⁰ Today’s children and the children yet to be born will be our successors. They may suffer too, but we are always a people of hope. We are assured of our victory in the long run, for Jesus rules all nations at the right hand of the Father right now. So let us hand on the faith of the Kingdom of God to our successors and let us live the prayer, “Thy

⁹ Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*,

¹⁰ Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *Out of Revolution: A Biography of Western Man*.

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kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.