

Scripture Reading for October 6th 2019

1 Samuel 8:4-22 (NIV)

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." ⁶ But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day." ¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." ²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Romans 13:1-5 (NIV)

¹³ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

Sermon: God and Politics

One of the things I was asked to preach on was the “Church and the State,” and given that we are facing national elections, it seemed an appropriate time to talk about God and politics. It’s tricky subject! Many books have been written on this matter, so don’t expect me to do justice to this important and complex topic in a sermon! Rest assured, I will not be telling you which way to vote – although I think we all *should* vote, and vote thoughtfully.

By way of an extended introduction to this topic, I think it is helpful to review God’s relation with his people throughout history, beginning with Moses. God called Moses to lead his people from bondage in Egypt and established a covenant with them in the form of the 10 Commandments. Later, Joshua took them over the River Jordan into the Promised Land and, in time, God called special individuals called “judges” to lead the people. They were a combination of a military deliverer, a magistrate, and an administrator.¹ Being a judge was *not* a hereditary right; *God* appointed his leaders.² The last judge was Samuel³, and his sons did not follow after his heart - or God’s. As we heard in our Old Testament reading, the people came Samuel wanting a king like the other nations around them and he was unhappy; so – we are told – was God: the LORD told Samuel: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but *they have rejected me as their king.*”⁴ Samuel warned the people of the consequences in having a king, namely taxation and conscription, but the people still wanted a monarchy and the LORD relents, saying, “Listen to them and give them a king.”⁵ Samuel sought out a suitable king and anointed tall, dark, and handsome Saul.⁶ Initially popular, he soon disobeyed God’s instructions and we are told God “regretted appointing Saul as King.”⁷ While kingship normally begins a *hereditary* line, in this case God began again with David. Kings were meant to be shepherds to the people, caring benevolently for their subjects, *as a surrogate for God*. But his didn’t happen; Israel’s history is of a few good kings and many corrupt ones! To counteract this tendency, God then raised up prophets to speak ‘truth to power,’ to encourage the king to exercise social justice and remind them to worship the one true God. In the end, Israel was repeatedly taken captive by various empires and lost their right to self-determination – the Roman empire in New Testament times being one such example.⁸ The Jewish *religion* and the Jewish *nation*, then, were strongly interlinked. As Israel self-analysed their plight, they understood their predicament to be a consequence of their repeated failure to keep the covenant made at the time of Moses.⁹ They therefore longed for a *political* deliverer in the Messiah,

¹ This is called a “theocracy” and is a form of government in which God is recognized as the supreme ruling authority, giving divine guidance to human intermediaries that manage the day to day affairs of the government.

² These judges were far from perfect; in fact, the book of Judges is a story of gradual moral decline from beginning to end!

³ He is also considered a “prophet” (like Moses).

⁴ 1 Sam 8:6-7. (Hear the echo of this in John 19:15.)

⁵ 1 Sam 8:19-22.

⁶ 1 Sam 9:2, 17.

⁷ 1 Sam 15:11. See also Gen 6:6. This notion of divine “regret” raises some fascinating theological questions!

⁸ Having said that, the Jews were granted special privileges under Roman Law to continue their various religious and social practices. Christianity did *not* have the same status, not least because its founder (Jesus) was known to have been *executed* by Roman law!

⁹ See Deut 28.

and many religious leaders sought to hasten his arrival by encouraging everyone to follow the Mosaic Law.¹⁰ Christianity was born in this environment as an emerging, minority religion within the Roman Empire.¹¹ It was not until Emperor Constantine's edict of Milan in 313 CE, did Christianity become acceptable - even respectable - within the Roman Empire.¹² Before long, Constantine wanted one religion for one empire and he established the first Church Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, in modern-day Turkey, to begin thrashing out church doctrine, create a formal Creed, and formalise the New Testament. Prior to that, the churches around the Mediterranean were semi-independent. The effect of all this was a merging of Church and State and the formation of "Christendom."¹³ This infused power, money, and influence into the Western Church and lasted for 1600 years!¹⁴ Even the Protestant Reformation required new national marriages of Church and State to sustain its rebellion from Rome.¹⁵ Presbyterianism¹⁶ is part of that Reformed tradition and has strong roots in the Church of Scotland.¹⁷ In the last few centuries, two important political developments occurred: the rise of *nationalism* and that of a modern *Parliamentary Democracy*. Moreover, in the last 60 years there has been the *collapse of Christendom*, which many churches are only just recognising,¹⁸ and we will see all three impact upon this topic of God and Politics.

First, the modern sense of nationalism strives for territorial self-governance, free from outside interference. Coupled with this, however, is an expected sense of *prime* loyalty to the nation state and its flag. Such a loyalty can usurp God and therefore become idolatrous, which – of course - the Judaeo-Christian tradition rejects. For example, what are we to make of the European theatres of the last two World Wars where Christians of one nation were killing Christians of another? There is something unsavoury here, because the kingdom of God does *not* recognise national boundaries. Ironically, Christians on *both* sides in those conflicts claimed God was in *their* side! Second, in modern Parliamentary Democracies, the monarch's influence is minimal and *public* elections take place to choose a country's leaders. Such an idea was unheard of in Biblical times!¹⁹ Thus translating biblical ideas, which we can see evolved from the times of the judges to that of the early Church, into our contemporary political scene is fraught with difficulty and therefore we need the ongoing wisdom of

¹⁰ And its many additions and traditions, which created an impossible burden on the common person.

¹¹ Christianity's roots were as a sect of Judaism, but as the New Testament witness makes clear, it established its own identity.

¹² The Edict of Milan went a step further than the earlier Edict of Toleration by Galerius in 311 CE, returning confiscated Church property. This effectively ended the persecution of the Church that occurred under various earlier emperors. This followed Constantine's conversion in 312 CE and military victory that made him Emperor.

¹³ This did not, however, stop the gospel traveling east to Babylon in Iraq, on to India and China - independent of the Latin Church - and being established as a minority religion in those regions. (This was *long* before explorer Marco Polo and, centuries later, Jesuit Francis Xavier travelled to the East.)

¹⁴ For brevity, I am overlooking the Great Schism of 1054 CE and the separation of the (Greek) Eastern Orthodox Churches.

¹⁵ Luther succeeded because of German support, and it suited Henry VIII to establish the Church of England. (Earlier attempts at reform were quashed.)

¹⁶ "Presbyterianism" is a form of *governance* that is strongly based on *elders*, rather than bishops or monarchy.

¹⁷ The Presbyterian Church in Canada is *not* a *national* Church; cf. Church of Scotland/England.

¹⁸ Earlier, there was a collapse of (political) "Empire," whether that be British, Spanish, Portuguese, German, etc.

¹⁹ Even though the roots of "democracy" (rule by the people) was in city-states, like Athens (c. 500 BCE).

the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Third, the collapse of Christendom²¹ has created not only a crisis for the place of the Church within a secular society, but a re-evaluation of the Church's relationship of power and privilege, that it previously had with the Establishment, in terms of politics, tax status, influence in ethics, education and healthcare, and so on. Some see this demise as a tragic loss of a what was previously deemed to be a "Christian nation." But that "loss," if that's the right word, really began centuries earlier in Western culture.²² Frankly, that is where we find ourselves today and I think it is foolish to waste effort trying to put the genie back in the bottle. It would be better if the Church recognised we are now in a situation not unlike the 1st century Christians, as a *minority* religion in a pluralistic society and one where the prevalent culture is not neutral to Christianity.²³

We could, then, ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" Our response may seem a bit confusing, as Jesus, in choosing *twelve* disciples, was making a *political* statement as this signified establishing a new Israel,²⁴ echoing its original twelve tribes. Jesus also *confronted* the religious and political leaders of his day; his overturning of the money-changers tables in the Temple court was a public rebellion against corruption.²⁵ And as we see in the gospels, Jesus keeps talking about the *kingdom* of God. Jesus sounds and acts *political*. Yet we also know that at his trial before Pilate, he stated, "My kingdom is not of this world."²⁶ Jesus was *not*, then, trying to be a *political king*, but his radical upside-down *kingdom* was most definitely for this world.²⁷ I think it better, then, to think of the kingdom of God not as a *place* but as a *time*; this makes better sense of the often-used expression of the "*now-and-not-yet*" kingdom of God. In other words, God's kingdom has begun, but there is much more to come. In this context then, trying to maintain or establish an idealised "Christian nation" is precisely what the gospel is *not* about!²⁸ The ministry of Jesus was clearly *not* an attempt to re-establish a pre-monarchical, *territorial* form of governance. However, it is theologically valid to say "Jesus is now King,"²⁹ but just *not* a territorial monarch [i.e., a theocracy]. Instead, God has given his people *new* hearts, renewed by the Holy Spirit. All this creates a framework in which to consider the relationship between God and politics today.

²⁰ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Does-The-Bible-Tell-Me-So.pdf>

²¹ See Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

²² i.e., during the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and with the emergence of an individualistic, secular society. Moreover, the spirit of Christianity had already been tainted by corruption within the Church (politics, wealth, inquisitions, crusades, factional wars, etc.)

²³ The lack of neutrality is to be an expected backlash, given Christianity's dominance within Christendom. However, not all are antagonistic toward Christianity, many are apathetic. However, the growth of "spirituality" in the West reveals a rejection of scientific materialism's influence on our secular society (modernism) and is a search for "something" more.

²⁴ The Church is the new Israel! (Baptism is into the world-wide church and sign of the new – or revised - covenant.)

²⁵ Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–16. This was a political act as much as a religious one. In this sense Jesus was behaving like an Old Testament prophet (cf. John the Baptist).

²⁶ John 18:36. Pilate judged that Jesus was no political threat and wanted to release him (John 19:6b).

²⁷ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

²⁸ And yet many Christians still think this is what the gospel is all about, which shows the lingering effects of Christendom.

²⁹ See John 18:37; Matt 28:18; Rev 1:5. The resurrection of Jesus is to be seen as divine vindication/verification of Christ's mission and message.

I want to now make a passing reference to our controversial New Testament reading, as many Christians see Romans 13 as the defining text on the relationship between the Church and the State.³⁰ The first verse says: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”³¹ When we hear this, we typically think of Hitler and violent dictators and wonder what planet Paul was on! Yet Jesus seems to be saying the same thing to Pilate at his trial, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”³² What are we to make of these verses today?³³

I think it is best to see this as stating “God is the *ultimate* ruler” and a leader’s authority is always *in relation* to him; our political rulers, then, *don’t* have absolute authority – even though some act and behave as if they do! Ideally, our leaders are benevolent and just, like the traditional view of a policeman as your *friend* who would protect and help you from danger. Antagonism toward our political leaders often signifies a *failure* of trust and our suspecting them of being corrupt or power-hungry. Nevertheless, their role is to create and maintain social cohesion,³⁴ for God desires order not chaos.³⁵ But *if* our leaders claim for themselves the absolute authority that belongs to God, *and* become agents of evil rather than of good, *then* I don’t think this passage addresses the Christian response to that scenario. Since such a government no longer functions as responsible servants *of* God, it is not to be blindly obeyed as such.³⁶ In fact, although Paul did not seek it, he repeatedly came into conflict with the civil authorities on his missionary journeys in Acts.³⁷ Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement in America can be recognised as legitimate in this light. But in resisting the State, follow Christ’s example and (seek to) do it *non-violently*, and always wisely counting the cost.³⁸ Paul gives no advice on knowing when a government or a leader has crossed a red-line and have become a force for evil and injustice; that we have to responsibly figure out for ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

I want to end with some summary principles and practical advice for you to consider. Some of you won’t agree with me; that’s OK, we can talk more later! First, some Christians think that their faith is *private*³⁹ and politics, by its *public* nature, is therefore completely separate from religion. Others feel their

³⁰ In fact, Rom 13:1-7 is so controversial it’s not in the lectionary! However, one must read this in the context of Rom 12:9-21 and 13:8-14. Paul was very much aware that the various Roman Emperors were hardly friendly towards Christianity.

³¹ Rom 13:1. See also 1 Pet 2:13-17.

³² John 19:11. This likely has double-meaning in John’s skillful use of words (i.e., God and the Pilate’s superior, the Emperor). Curiously, using on Rom 13:1, the Christian Right in America often proclaims that *God* obviously wanted Donald Trump in the White House. But based on that very same logic, they should *not* then claim that God *didn’t* want Barack Obama to be president before him! In a Democracy, where the *public* choose their leaders, dare I suggest that - because of free will - God has little to do with the election outcome. [Or, perhaps better, is *limited*, i.e., God may not get what God *wants*!]

³³ This is very *Jewish* in its thinking and *not*, then, a distinctly *Christian* view of the political powers.

³⁴ Just like God *created* the cosmos in Genesis 1, and continues to *sustain* it. Moreover, we are to pay our taxes to help make social cohesion happen; see also Mark 12:13-17, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.” This does not mean that our political leaders must acknowledge God’s providence or their allegiance to him.

³⁵ 1 Cor 14:33a.

³⁶ Consider Apartheid in South Africa as a modern example, as well as Hitler’s Germany and other dictatorships.

³⁷ See also Acts 4:19-20, which again speaks of a primary loyalty.

³⁸ See Luke 14:25-34. Put a different way, Christians are not to frivolously disregard civil authorities, as if the freedom from the Mosaic Law achieved through Christ’s death and resurrection means freedom from all civil law too!

³⁹ Faith, in this view, is about perceived as saving ‘souls’ for a non-physical afterlife. Politics is, then, considered “worldly.”

personal faith *obliges* them to work within global structures to make for a better society. The first one tends to be *escapist* and the second sometimes fails to be *distinctive* within society at large. I think our prime political task as Christians is to be *the church*, a local embodiment of what the kingdom of God means in practice, as a community who truly believe that Jesus Christ is King. The church in the first century was a countercultural phenomenon which inevitably influenced the political world;⁴⁰ I think in a post-Christendom world, the same can be true today. When we truly live out Christ's mission in a given locality, we become a miniature, visible model of a healthy society. Even so, the Church is global, *transnational*, and *transcultural* and we should not lose sight of that fact, today, on World Communion Sunday. A large network of vibrant churches can help shape the culture within a country; but this is organic or bottom-up, rather than top-down as in the case of Christendom.⁴¹ Second, of course we must vote and do so thoughtfully. It's too easy to be apathetic or cynical about politicians. Elections matter and many people in other countries earnestly wish they had a voice in choosing their political leaders. Third, we must not belittle the important contribution prayer makes to political life; we should pray for our leaders to promote justice, freedom, peace, family, creation care and fulness of life. Fourth, there is *no* political party that can claim to hold "*the Christian perspective.*" It was always joked in Britain that the Church of England was the Conservative party at prayer! This reveals the historical, Christendom connection between a national Church and the governing establishment.⁴² But the Church's role is *not* to underwrite a political party *or* a particular system of government. So we are *not* to be mindlessly voting for a political party because we have always voted that way. Instead, our role as Christians is to first think through the various social and economic issues that we as a country are facing *today* and then vote for the political party we think has the best, realistic policy ideas to address them for the benefit of *all* who live here - and not just for ourselves.⁴³ We also have to discern *who* we trust to act with integrity - locally, provincially, and nationally. Some of you may also want to join lobby groups that promote social action. Others may want to be active within political party, perhaps even running for political office. In all these things, Christians should act with honesty, integrity and humility.

In conclusion, hear again what Jesus prayed concerning his disciples, just prior his crucifixion, "My prayer is *not* that you [God] take them *out* of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."⁴⁴ We are therefore *not* to try to form a segregated Christian enclave or to seek a "Christian" nation. Instead, we work collaboratively with others on projects whose values align with those of the kingdom of God,⁴⁵ even if our partners don't view it that way. As we work through all the practical implications in this complex relationship between God and politics, let us not forget the life of Jesus reveals that God is *not* apathetic about evil or the state of his world, and that he has called us to be good stewards working on his behalf. Amen. Let us pray.

⁴⁰ Read the book of Acts, especially 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 6:1-7.

⁴¹ Christendom by its very nature is top-down.

⁴² In the USA, Christianity is often linked to the Republican party.

⁴³ This also means that, as concerned citizens, we need to educate ourselves about the political issues and the candidates' positions. We need discernment to distinguish between fanciful political promises and realisable ones.

⁴⁴ John 19:15. (This is part of Jesus' prayer for his disciples prior to his death.)

⁴⁵ Recognising that in our complex world there is often not a simple "Christian" response.