**Pentecost and the General Election**

**Acts 2:1-21**

This week, our minds turn to the General Election on Thursday and it would be remiss of me not to say a few words about that this morning; not in any party-political sense, of course, but to speak more generally about it in the light of the Pentecost story that we have heard read today.

And it is important for us to think about this because, as Christians, we have a responsibility to be informed and engaged with issues that affect us nationally and internationally.

The church has always been politically engaged. The story of the Old Testament is the story of the people of God growing from nomadic tribe to nationhood. Jesus was an intensely political character engaged with the politics of the Temple and the politics of the Roman Empire. The early church grew in the context of Empire and eventually, the Emperor Constantine himself was converted and Christianity became the political religion of the State. This year, we mark the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s contribution to the Reformation, which impacted both church and state. And, since then, the church has been a politically active organisation in our own Parliament, in opposition to the rise of fascism, in opposing slavery, in developing the education system, in pioneering and formalising State Youth Work and so much more.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said: “When people say that the Bible and politics don’t mix, I wonder which Bible they are reading”.

But as we consider the politics of our General Election this week, we recognise that the readings we have heard from Scripture this morning are set in an entirely different context. These passages from Scripture were written 2,000 years ago in Palestine: so different from 21st-century Enfield. And yet there are principles for us to draw from the story of Pentecost that can inform our thinking this week.

First, I think that underpinning the Pentecost story, of course, is the idea that God was pouring out his blessing on his people in a quite extraordinary and lavish way. God was blessing them not because they were somehow special or in any way deserving of that blessing. God was blessing them simply out of his great compassion and grace.

The abundance that was poured out on his people that first Pentecost was undeserved and unearned but an indication of grace and compassion and love. And I think when we get a sense that God has poured out his blessings on us, even though we have done nothing to earn those blessings, then we are more willing to live out that undeserved compassion to others.

As we have received, so we should give…

God has met our needs – purely because he has love and compassion. And we, as a society, should do what we can to mirror that undeserved grace: to meet the needs of the vulnerable and poor and fragile, not because they have in any sense ‘earned’ our support, but purely because they too are beautiful creations of God. As Christians, we must consider political issues like asylum and benefits and homelessness from a position of realising that God has met our needs and blessed us and, if we are to become truly Christlike, we must mirror that love to the world. Jesus was absolutely clear about this in Matthew 25 and was clear that our care and support for the most vulnerable in society is how we will be judged. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 25:31:

“When the Son of Man comes as King, he will sit on his royal throne and the peoples of the nations will be gathered before him…He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come and possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you…I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me into your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’ The righteous will then answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important, you did it for me!’”

As we come to vote this week in the General Election, whoever we decide to vote for, let’s make sure that we are mindful of the unearned compassion of God shown to us and the responsibility that we have as Christians to create a world where compassion is shown to others.

As we serve the weak, we are serving Jesus in our midst.

Second, this first Pentecost Sunday was founded on a core value of celebrating cultural diversity and recognising the inherent unity that exists across people of all cultural backgrounds.

In verse 9 of our reading from Acts, the crowd that had gathered comprised a multi-cultural, diverse group of people and yet, God impressed upon them a unity that was common across their humanity. In verse 9, the crowd says this:

“We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia—yet all of us hear the disciples speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!”

Here was unity in diversity. Here was a great celebration of cultural diversity and acceptance of one another, bonded together into one humanity under God.

Whichever way we choose to vote on Thursday, we must surely be driven by a desire to see the creation of a society that reflects this fundamental Pentecost ideal.

A society in which cultural diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated.

A society in which everyone is equally respected, regardless of race, colour or creed.

A society in which fear of different cultural expressions is replaced by acceptance.

Pursuing the common good for our culturally diverse society is a Christian obligation. Our relationship to others and society as a whole must be founded on fairness, generosity of spirit and hospitality. Those were core values exhibited that first Pentecost Sunday and should be at the heart of how we express the Christian faith today.

Third and finally, I want to suggest that a further core value exhibited on this first Pentecost Sunday was an unwavering faith in the ultimate sovereignty and authority of God. The message that Peter gave on that first Sunday spoke of God’s authority over individual people and the whole of creation. Ultimately, this is God’s world and God is in control.

We need to remember that, particularly when the result is declared next Friday morning. Inevitably, some of us will be rejoicing at the result and others of us may be disappointed or even deeply upset and troubled. But in all things, we are reminded that this is God’s world and it is he who reigns supreme, not any one politician or political party.

And, as a result of that, our calling as Christians is to remain faithful in prayer for our political leaders, whether we voted for them or not. Paul wrote this in his first letter to Timothy:

“I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people; for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct.”

That is our basis of prayer for whoever is Prime Minister come next Friday: that they will lead us in building a society that is hallmarked by peace, a society that is well ordered and reverent towards God. Whoever is elected Prime Minister this week, we will pray for them as they undertake this great responsibility of State.

So, in conclusion on this Pentecost Sunday, we remember this:

That we live in a beautiful world but a world in which there is much chaos and brokenness. We have, of course, been rocked by the recent Manchester terror attack. We have been rocked by the terror attack in London last night. We live in a society, in a city, where there is a severe threat to us all. But we are mindful of the fact that we still live in a free society: a free society in which democracy is both a ‘right’ and a ‘responsibility’.

Perhaps more than ever before, there are millions of people giving up their homes, their security, even their lives, in the desperate pursuit of what we enjoy: free society and democracy. We must not take democracy and freedom for granted: more than ever before, perhaps, we have a responsibility to vote in the Election and speak out for what we believe in. Whether that is a vote for Labour or Conservative, Green or UKIP, the responsibility to vote is a response to the freedom that we share in this nation; others are literally dying for the opportunity that we have on Thursday and we must not sit lightly to that.

The history of the church, the community of God born that first Pentecost Sunday is the history of a community that has been a primary agent for social action and social care.

The history of the church, the community of love and compassion born that first Pentecost Sunday is the history of a community that has been present in each locality, engaged with the deepest needs of those on the margins; providing food and shelter, financial support, emotional care, spiritual guidance, putting the needs of others before itself.

Whichever way you choose to vote this coming Thursday, my prayer is that each one of us will be moved by the spirit of the Pentecost community that is our spiritual heritage:

That we will want to see a society created that is underpinned by grace and compassion, even though that may be unearned.

That we will want to see a society created where we recognise our inherent unity and we will celebrate our diversity rather than a society hallmarked by division and fear of cultural difference.

That we recognise the ultimate sovereignty of God over his creation and that he is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

And we will pray for whoever becomes our Prime Minister and pray for a society that is just, caring, compassionate, hospitable and loving - a society that reflects the spirit of Pentecost in all its detail.