**Romans 13:1-14**

**Love, respect and obedience**

Today is Advent Sunday, when we begin to prepare our hearts to receive Christ at Christmas, but also think about the Second Coming of Jesus and the fact that he is sovereign and Lord over all creation and all the nations on earth.

But we also find ourselves less than two weeks away from a General Election in which a new earthly government will be elected and the future of our nation will be determined for the coming few years. And I cannot remember an election that is grappling with such polarised opinions and perspectives.

But regardless of where we stand in terms of our Party Politics, or in terms of the Brexit debate, or indeed the Climate Crisis, there is one truth that remains: Come Friday 13 December, one party – or one coalition of parties – will have prevailed and the new vision will have been cast and each one of us will need to respond to that on a personal level.

And, as Christians, this can be a tough idea, especially for those of us who hold strong personal political beliefs and may dread the thought of those with whom we disagree holding the power in future decision-making.

And it is tough for us as Christians, because we must take seriously Paul’s words in the first verse of the reading that we have just heard from his letter to the Romans in which he wrote this: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

And he goes on to say this: “Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed…Therefore one must be subject…because of conscience…Pay taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.”

Let’s not underestimate just how tough these verses are for us to get our heads around.

For 2000 years, these verses have been poured over and analysed and interpreted into contemporary situations, and out of these has arisen a doctrine of the state and an appropriate Christian response to the state. During the period of the Reformation, the Baptists and Anabaptists and Quakers, all suffered persecution on the back of these verses. The Lutheran Church and the Third Reich in Germany under the rise of Hitler worked together to oppress more radical forms of Christianity as a result of an understanding of the state based on these verses. Apartheid in South Africa took a similar view and there are many other examples.

The question is, how are we to understand these verses? Are they a call not so much to civil disobedience but passive obedience on the part of the church, even when the state may be considered to be wrong?

Is this a call to acquiescence in all things and a rule never to oppose the Government, even when it is believed that the Government may be acting immorally?

If so, what does this do to the prophetic voice of the church and its calling to speak out for the marginalised?

Or are we to read this passage another way?

I think the answer to that question is, as always, to put this passage firmly within the context of the rest of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

So how are we to consider this passage? Is it calling for civil acquiescence in the face of state authority as an eternal value or is this a culturally specific piece of teaching which we are called to draw principles out of without necessarily needing to stick to the letter of the teaching? I would argue that this is culturally specific, and let me tell you why…

Let’s think about the broader context of Romans. The whole book has primarily had one key theme running through it, which is the identity of this newly constituted people who are called Christians. Paul’s emphasis throughout the whole book is to help this new religious grouping work out their identity: who they are in relation to God, who they are in relation to themselves, who they are in relation to the world, who they are in relation to each other.

This whole letter is about identity formation.

And so it is absolutely understandable that Paul should have something to say about who they are in relation to the State. These early Christians were ordinary citizens from every strata of society: slaves, masters, freemen, rich and poor. And they needed to know how to be good citizens of the Roman Empire as well as the good citizens of the Kingdom of God.

But we also need to put it into the specific context of when Paul was writing this letter. We know he wrote it in Autumn AD54 or early AD55, which was an interesting political time in Rome because there was increasing unrest as a result of the tax system.

There were two forms of taxation that needed to be paid. The first was the *tributum*, which was a form of direct tax. The second was the *vectigalia*, which was indirect taxation; for example tax on rent, the sale of slaves, customs duty and death duties. And round about AD53, there began a social unrest at these taxes that grew and grew over the coming years until in AD58, the tax system in Rome was reformed.

So Paul is writing into a very specific situation here, giving advice to the church as to how they should respond to the increasing unrest over unfair taxation. Sounds very familiar, doesn’t it!

But for these reasons, I think we need to read the first 7 verses of Chapter 13 as very specific to the time and speaking into a specific cultural situation. Of course, as with all Scripture, there are principles we can draw out for ourselves, but we mustn’t lose sight of the historical context of what Paul is writing and I don’t think we can take these verses as some sort of theology of the State that is binding for all time.

So let’s work through these verses in a bit more detail…

Verse 1: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” - a simple, stark statement. Paul is drawing a boundary of definition here for us as if to say, “In your earthly context, with your earthly being, be subject to the governing authorities”.

And the word he uses for ‘be subject’ is a very strong one: it goes beyond the idea of ‘be responsive to…’ and has more to do with the idea of ‘be subordinate to…’ It’s a strong and clear idea, and in absolute accordance with the rest of Scripture, where believers are encouraged to understand their social status and live out that status accordingly whether that be husband and wife, child, slave or master, church leader or secular leader.

The principle is clear, that we are to realise our identity in the world and live it out as a disciple of Jesus Christ with integrity.

And Paul goes on to clarify his thinking: “For there is no authority except given by God, and the powers that have been established by God”.

Again, we need to be very careful how we interpret this passage and only say what Paul says, not infer too much into it. Paul is clearly drawing deep into his Jewish heritage here. In Proverbs 8, God says, “By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just”. So Paul is merely drawing his readers back to their heritage to see the hand of God at work in the political realm as well as the spiritual realm in such a way that there is no real difference between the political and the spiritual: all is one under the authority of God.

What Paul is not saying here is that we must accept all political decision-making and activity as a reflection of the will of God. It would be impossible to claim divine pleasure for the cruelty of President Assad, for example, or any other oppressive dictator. That is not what Paul is saying: his is a far more nuanced argument.

Paul expands very helpfully on this a bit when he goes on to say: “and those who resist shall receive judgement on themselves”. Grammatically, the word ‘resist’ is a Perfect Participle, which suggests a determined and consistent course of action. So it seems that Paul is suggesting that we should not seek the overthrow of Government in some sort of anarchic fashion, through sustained and aggressive action - but that it is OK to protest on single issues.

I find that a really helpful distinction for Paul to make when it comes to thinking about how Christians are to engage politically. We are not called to be anarchists, overthrowing the whole social order. But it is perfectly reasonable, even our duty, to speak out on single-issue protests. That was the example of Jesus, of course: in the one breath, he could say “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s” and, in the next breath say, “I have come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, to set free the oppressed…”: verses that we must be careful not to spiritualise away.

Ours is an intensely political faith; not in an anarchic way, but in a way that speaks up for the marginalised and challenges the powerful to work for the good of all, not selfish pursuit and gain…

Paul is not justifying abusive rule as containing within it the hand of God. But he is saying that, in principle, ordered and structured society is a good thing.

And so Paul brings this argument to a conclusion in the context of the ongoing debate over taxation in Rome in verse 6: “For that is why you also pay tribute”: *tributum*, you remember, being the direct tax they were asked to pay. And then in verse 7, Paul images Jesus’ words of “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” when he says: “Pay taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.”

So in conclusion, Paul is saying here that the notion of an ordered society is ordained by God and that good leadership, control, law and order are to be honoured and upheld as part of our Christian duty. That is not to say that we should not protest on single issues. It is our duty to do so. But we are not anarchists and we are not called to overthrow the social order in the name of Christ.

I am painfully aware that this is an interpretation of this passage that is born out of Western mindset and that we live in a free democracy where protest is acceptable as part of our human rights. I am painfully aware that if we were having this service in Syria this morning or Zimbabwe or Afghanistan or Iraq, then we would be interpreting these verses very differently indeed. But truth is contextual; there is always an inter-play between Scripture and context and the best we can do is interpret the Bible into our own context and see what it has to say to us tonight. What these 7 verses say to us may be very different to what they say to Christians in the Middle East suffering persecution and living under dictatorship…That doesn’t make our interpretation any less true and I am not suggesting that our interpretation is the only one or that it works for all Christians in all situations. It is merely an interpretation for us, here this morning, in our specific cultural circumstances.

And having considered how we are to build relations with the State, Paul then personalises this even further by talking about how we are to live in relationship with one another. Verse 8: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Love is the fulfilment of the law of God – it is at the heart of our identity to love others. The heart of the Christian message is that love in action fulfils the law. That is the example of Christ to us and that is how each one of us is called to live. As Christians, we are called to ‘live love’.

But how we live out our lives in relation to other people and as social beings in relation to authority must always be done so in the light of the fact that Jesus will one day return and we will all be brought face to face with God in that moment, which is what Advent Sunday is primarily about.

As Paul writes in verse 11: “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake up from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.”

I’ve mentioned before that, in the Bible, there are two different Greek words for ‘time’: ‘chronos’ and ‘kairos’. The word ‘chronos’ relates to time as it is measured by a clock or the passing of the days and ‘kairos’ relates to moments of time that are filled with eternal significance. Not surprisingly, it is the word ‘kairos’ that Paul uses here: “You know what time it is, it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.”

Paul goes on to say in verse 12 that, “the night is far gone, and the day is near”, and so he makes an allusion to the Second Coming of Jesus; the day is near, nearer than when we first believed. So we need to wake up from our spiritual slumber and make sure that we are living appropriately for God. We need to assess our behaviours, our habits and, as Paul concludes in verse 14, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ”, which is to say, we are to be imitators of Christ in our everyday living, making no provision for the flesh and our earthly desires but reflecting Christ in our behaviour and way of interacting with the world around us.

So we have a very pragmatic passage from Paul here, speaking deeply into his contemporary culture and that of his first readers but with spiritual principles for us to apply in our context.

As we approach the General Election, we should be praying for all the candidates, regardless of their political party, that they may be worthy of the calling and responsibility they seek.

We should show respect to those elected, regardless of their political party. And we should not seek to oppose the order of society in any anarchic sense but we absolutely must fulfil our obligation as Christians to engage with politics and campaign over issues where the marginalised and the vulnerable and the poor suffer more than they should.

We should love one another and extend compassion and respect and kindness to one another.

And all of that is done in the context of the return of Jesus Christ who is the Sovereign Lord of all the earth and will come again in judgement and glory. And there is clearly a sense of urgency for us in this because the return of Christ will surely happen and it is nearer now than when we first believed. We must be sure that we are ready for the return of Christ and that our lives exemplify a deep spirituality and belief so that we won’t be found wanting on that Day.

Now is the time for us to wake from our sleep…

**Some questions to think about…**

1. What do you think should be the relationship between the Church and politics?
2. What sort of political issues should the Church be speaking out on? How should we go about that?
3. In what ways should St. Andrew’s be politically engaged in Enfield? What are the key social issues that we should be focussing on?
4. How does it feel to obey the Government, even when we may feel it is wrong? How can we square this circle in our own lives?
5. What are your beliefs about the Second Coming of Jesus? Do you see it as a literal event or a metaphor?
6. What difference does the idea of the Second Coming make to how you live your life?
7. What do you believe will happen at the Second Coming?
8. How can you prepare yourself better for the Second Coming of Jesus?