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Isaiah 45: 1-7, 1 Thessalonians 1@ 1-10 and Matthew 22: 156-22

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What has God to do with politics? Somewhat to my surprise, a couple at Matins last month commented, *"We love it when you get political!"* I don't generally see myself as a political preacher, though I'm aware some have recently suggested that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishops who sit in the House of Lords are getting too involved in politics and should confine themselves to praying and preaching the Gospel.

But the challenge, for those of us who spend our lives attempting to "preach the Gospel" is that now, as in Biblical times, religion and politics are closely intertwined.

I would suggest that our existence as human beings - social animals who have to interact with one another as individuals and communities - means that we cannot play our part in God's world without being aware of politics in the broadest sense.

The incarnate Christ came to live among us, to share not only in the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also the ways in which individuals and nations interacted at that time.

Jesus' Summary of the Law *"Love God and love your neighbour as yourself"*, might not sound like a political statement, but it is a clear challenge and clearly felt incredibly threatening to many different groups of people, who felt that their understanding of the world – and their actions – were being criticised. They tried to get Jesus to fall foul of the authorities by making statements which appeared more obviously to subvert the social order, and indeed, the Pharisees' sneaky questions in our Gospel this morning are a sly attempt to trap Jesus into a political statement about taxation, which they can use to report him to the Romans for disobedience. He of course, wrongfoots them by agreeing that the coins, stamped with the image of the Emperor, are due to the Emperor, whilst we should concentrate on lifting up to God all who bear his image (that is to say, every person created in the image of God). Love God and love your neighbour, made in the image of God.

Though there are some who prefer the church not to be thinking about politics, there are others who come to us regularly to reflect on what is going on in the world around us. Someone stopped me in the street this week with the greeting, *"Good morning, Vicar. Do you think we are on the brink of World War III?"* Rushing down the hill to take a service, all I could say was that I believe we are in the hands of God, a statement emphasised by our first reading from Isaiah.

It is, of course, impossible to discuss the Judaeo-Christian tradition which informs our Scriptures, and today's reading without addressing the desperately sad, frightening and horrifying crisis in the Holy Land today. Our hearts go out to every innocent person who has lost their life or loved ones, or who continues to live in fear.

Through our Scriptures we may view this through the lens of thousands of years of geo-political history, during which the different peoples of that region have been invaded, conquered, attacked, rebuked, exiled and forgotten, both suffering and causing suffering.

Today's reading recalls one element of this traumatic history: After managing to fight off the mighty Assyrian Empire, the people of Judah were conquered by the neighbouring Babylonian Empire, who shifted the inhabitants of Jerusalem wholesale into Babylon, where they remained in

exile for thirty years. As Isaiah was writing, the Babylonian Empire itself was now under threat of annihilation by the Medes and Persians, who followed a different policy, allowing exiles to return to their homeland. Liberated by Cyrus, King of the Persians, the Jews would return to Israel and commence the re-building of their holy city, Jerusalem. Yet for them, this whole episode was deeply confusing.

Cyrus was not one of the Chosen People; he worshipped foreign gods, and he was, despite his milder attitude to exiles, a conqueror and empire-builder. How could he be the one to enable the return to Jerusalem which God had long promised? It didn't fit with their clear, inflexible understanding of goodies and baddies; it suggested that in fulfilling his promise to them, God was also giving power and success into the hands of someone whose politics and beliefs they didn't see as worthy or appropriate.

God makes it very clear that he has chosen Cyrus, to act as his agent in the world, turning the Israelites' view of the world upside down. Yet the point he is making is this: *"I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no God."* If he chooses to arm the pagan Cyrus to change the course of history, then this is up to him.

This story presents a further challenge to us today. We may all have views about who in the world is good or bad, who has won our empathy by following our system of government, political inclinations, religious or cultural heritage, or whom we support as the "underdog". At the end of the day, no human or political situation is completely straightforward. We wrestle painfully with the horrors and signs of inhumanity we see, not just in the Holy Land, but in so many areas of the world today and pray for things to change, but the story of Cyrus tells us that we can never predict how God will answer those prayers and act within the history of his world.

Perhaps the question is not, *"What has God to do with politics?"*, but *"Where do we rightly see God in politics?"* We believe that God created the world and is present in it – the light, the darkness, the joy and the pain, the wide sweep of history and the glories of geographical diversity. We should never shut ourselves off from what is going on around us, but we can measure all our actions and reactions by Jesus' yardstick: *"Does this honour God and our neighbour?"*

Our first loyalty is to God and to his creation, recognising that human beings need social and political systems in order to be able to live together with justice and peace, but it is the ability to see God at work in our world and to follow his lead, even in those things we cannot understand, which will lead us to the *"peace which passes all understanding."*