

Sunday 29 March 2026, Palm Sunday, Choral Matins

Isaiah 5.1-7

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I've been told the clergy shouldn't preach 'political' sermons. I've read recently in a national newspaper that the Church of England should stick to talking about God rather than 'embracing woke causes.' I've heard people say that they don't like it when their priests express 'political views' from the pulpit.

Well, tough.

This is going to be a political sermon, not 'party' political, but political in the sense that all sermons about ethics and morality are political: they have to do with the *polis*, the body politic, the people of a given city or nation. One cannot say something about how we are meant to think or behave *collectively* without being political. And I'm afraid sometimes that means saying something that might sound 'woke' or like an expression of a 'political view'.

A minister who never says anything that sounds political is only preaching half a gospel, because what Jesus, our scriptures, and the Church teach about how we as individuals function in a society has implications not just for us 'as individuals' but for us as 'individuals in relationship'. In other words, what my faith teaches *me* to do does and should have an impact on what *we* do together.

Not seeming to understand this is either wilful blindness or active conspiracy to dis-integrate society, to tear down social norms, and to subject us all to the atomisation that benefits no one but megacorporations and multi-billionaires who can sell us products to 'solve' the problems of loneliness and isolation that they themselves are, at least partially, responsible for creating in the first place.

In our first lesson from Isaiah, we hear about God's vineyard. This vineyard sits on top of a very fruitful hill and is surrounded by a wall. God has good hopes for this vineyard, that it should bring forth good fruit ready for making into good wine. But instead of grapes, it brings forth wild grapes. In the original Hebrew this term 'wild grapes' suggests that not only are the grapes not good for making wine but that they stink. In Isaiah's song, the whole of God's well-tended vineyard has brought forth stinking fruit. The whole nation stinks.

*As the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant, we are told that the entire nation is a frustration and a disappointment to God. What they produce, their works, is an affront to God's nostrils and good for nothing. As one commentator observes, 'the sweet wine that God desired was justice (*mishpat*), but instead, the people produced bloodshed (*mishpach*)... God also anticipates righteousness (*tsedeqah*) but has instead heard only a cry (*tse'aqah*).'*

We miss this clever wordplay in our English translation but the meaning is still clear; faith has failed in the people and so they displease the Lord with their deeds. What God sought was judgment but what he sees is oppression. What God desired was righteousness but instead he finds a cry of violence and tyranny. 'Tse'aqah' is the same word used to speak of the outcry against the rapists of Sodom and of the abuse of the taskmasters in Egypt.

For Isaiah, a God-pleasing vineyard should produce justice and right-dealing: honesty, integrity, compassion, wisdom, generosity. A godly nation should defend the cause of the poor and the widow, the orphan and the oppressed. It should care for prisoners and those without a home. Ask yourselves whether the incessant cuts to our welfare system have improved the lot of the orphan and the homeless. Ask whether our politicians have at the forefront of their legislative agenda the care of prisoners and the needs of the poor. Ask yourselves whether the smell that goes up to God from our parliament, our newsrooms, opinion pages, and social media accounts is the sweet wine of justice or the stench of bloodshed, be it either real or condoned.

I said earlier that what my faith teaches *me* to do does and should have an impact on what *we* do together. Society is not something external to me; I am a constituent member of it. And what 'society' does, at least in an ostensibly democratic system, reflects at its core the desires of those who vote in its elections, return representatives, and thereby shape its laws. *We* are responsible for the stench of oppression rising up into the heavens. What there should be is the sweet-smelling savour of a national life characterised by kindness and prayer.

*What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?
wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?*

My friends, this is a political sermon but, because it is political, it is also personal. What *we* do together is a result of the faith of *individuals*. How are we to respond to what we have been confronted with in Isaiah today? How should you respond? Let me suggest three things:

First, take some time to reflect on what you say and how you say it. Do your words display compassion, do they promote justice and peace? Are your words written of the same quality as your words spoken? If you use social media, is what you say there the sort of thing you'd be willing to say to someone's face? What we say 'in secret' often reveals who we really are. What we say as individuals shapes what society says as a whole.

Second, consider your politics. This is a difficult topic at the best of times, so please don't think I want to tell you who to vote for. However, what I do want to do is tell you what kind of person or party platform you should vote for: it's one whose attitudes and aims are most in line with a godly society as described by Isaiah. If your party leader goes around doing down the needy, the vulnerable, and the already-hurting, his or her views are a stench before the Lord. Have nothing to do with such a person, for God desires justice and righteousness, not bloodshed and the cry of oppression.

Finally, pray. Perhaps this should be the first thing you do but I thought I ought to end on a positive note. Prayer is the balm not only for our own individual woes but for the woes of a nation. Prayer is a mighty act, mightier than voting, stronger than speaking out, more powerful than rising up for change. Prayer moves mountains and transforms whole communities. Prayer does what most of us can only dream of doing on this earth: it goes straight to the ears of the King. What we say, even quietly and timorously in secret is heard in the throne room of God Almighty. So pray for justice, pray for goodness and mercy and truth. Pour out your heart of compassion before the Lord and beg for his mercy on this vineyard in which we live. Let not his final word to us be, 'I looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.' Amen.