



MAKING PEACE

with **PROXIMATE JUSTICE**

CHRISTIANS IN
POLITICS MUST
LEARN TO ACCEPT
*SOME JUSTICE,
SOME MERCY*

BY STEVEN GARBER

A few years ago a pastor in the city asked if I would meet someone in his congregation whose work was in the world of national security. A senior official with complex responsibilities, he knew that his deepening faith required him to “think Christianly” about his life and labour, but he did not know where to begin. What could he read? With whom could he talk? As he put it, “Day by day I have unimaginable evil coming across my desk. What am I supposed to do? How do I respond in light of my faith? I cannot do nothing—but what *am* I to do?”

And so we began to think together. I arranged a conversation with a handful of friends from across the city whose theological instincts I trusted, but whose own work ranged from the U.S. Congress to a Cabinet office to the State Department to a think tank: all people who with fear and trembling have given themselves to working out the meaning of their salvation in the world of politics.

We began with Augustine, and made our way through the centuries, eventually coming to the contemporary political philosophers Hannah Arendt

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and Jean Bethke Elshtain, intriguingly both scholars of Augustine’s political vision, 1500 years later. As we got up to leave after several hours, the friend whose questions had brought the meeting into being said, “Thank you for taking my vocation seriously. That has never happened before.”

The stark simplicity of his statement stuck with me. How is it possible to find our way into great work, even great work in the realm of politics, without the collegiality of kindred spirits who will pray with us, think with us, work with us, as we give heart and mind to living the vision of the coming of the Kingdom?

There is not a week in my life when I do not think about the tensions of the now-but-not-yet nature of the Kingdom, where Jesus has made all things new, and yet where we still do not see that reality completely incarnate in history. I have to make peace with proximate justice, even as I ache for hope and history to finally and fully rhyme.

Christian responsibility, the curriculum centred upon an exploration of the themes of truth, justice, *shalom*, and hope, set amidst concrete, contemporary policy debates ranging from welfare reform to Middle East politics.

If one issue perennially reared its head among the students it was this: *I used to believe that doing justice was possible. In fact, that brought*

DO JUSTICE,
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WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD?

PLEASE, GROW UP.

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SOMETHING IS BETTER THAN NOTHING

For many years, I taught in the American Studies Program on Capitol Hill, an interdisciplinary semester of study focused on nurturing in undergraduates the vision and virtues required to take up vocations in the public square. Formed by a deeply wrought understanding of

me to Washington. But now I see that hope is naïve: it just isn't going to happen. It was as if we were always living and learning within the tension created by the Machiavellian temptation, which lurks for anyone who dares to care about the *polis*, viz. "Please grow up, will you? *Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God?* That's for the young and the idealistic. If you are going to make it here in the city, you will have to leave that innocence behind."

And so, semester-by-semester I would reflect on the hard-won and, perhaps, even, hard-bitten wisdom of Lord Bismarck: If you want to respect sausage and law, then don't watch either being made. There is a truthfulness about the aphorism that is more than just *realpolitik*. Bismarck offers a window into the reality of political life in a fallen world, even though his story is not the whole story.

I know of no one who has honestly tried to be politically faithful—in the general vocation of God's people to be the salt and light of the Kingdom in every sphere of human concern nor in the more specific occupation of politics, whether as elected official or in some other manifestation of public service—who has not navigated through the shoals of the conflicting calls of the city of God and the city of man. The calling implicit to that quest requires that we ponder the sausage-making with our eyes wide open, and still choose to act with a responsibility marked by love. I do not know of any challenge that is more difficult than to really know the world, and still choose to love it.

It is one thing to come to a capital city like Washington with great hopes of change. *If I work hard, then it will be different—at least in a year or two or, at the most, maybe five.* But putting one's shoulders to the wheel of history more often than not produces a bruise to one's spirit, not the advent of the Kingdom in all its fullness.

Augustine understood this a long time ago. Wrestling with the ruination of the Roman Empire—what we now know as its decline and fall—he searched Scripture for a way of understanding his own moment. How do the people of God remain faithful to the vision of the Kingdom, when evil and injustice seem to rule, when there is more heartache than happiness in being citizens set in time and space, in finite,

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fallen cities and states? The now-but-not-yet of the Kingdom was his bread-and-butter and, therefore, he gave us *proximate justice* as a way of finding our way amidst the ruins of political economies anywhere and everywhere.

Proximate justice realizes that something is better than nothing. It allows us to make peace with *some* justice, *some* mercy, all the while realizing that it will only be in the new heaven and new earth that we find *all* our longings finally fulfilled, that we will see *all* of God's demands finally met. It is only then and there we will see all of the conditions for human flourishing finally in place, socially, economically, and politically.

LIVING BETWEEN TIMES

When we pray, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are yearning for the way things ought to be, and someday *will be*—even as we give ourselves to what *can be* in a world where evil persists, sometimes very malignantly. If we think that the Lordship of Christ over every square inch of the whole of reality means that we can settle for nothing less than explicit recognition of that claim and its reality in public life, then we will never be able to sustain the vocations that are required for meaningful political witness in the face of the continuing injustice which comes from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

A couple of years ago during Advent I offered a meditation in the White House that I called "Always Syriana But Never Christmas." The film *Syriana* had been out for several months, and it seemed to fall into line with other stories of cinematic cynicism that were recent box-office hits. I saw them all, and strained against them each time. On the one hand I do remember Bismarck and sausage-making—all too well,

given my years in Washington. Like everyone, I feel the weight and complexity of our globalizing world, and I am aware of some of its terror and distress. The love of money and power is the root of all kinds of evil.

And yet, and yet... I protested the end-of-the-story "realism." That if we watch long enough, then everyone will finally sell out, the last man will finally be compromised because, of course, no one has any real integrity, and truth, justice, and mercy are never really part of the political equation. Therefore, our cynicism is justified.

Always Syriana but never Christmas? I was thinking of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and*

Machiavelli's realpolitik and *realeconomik* seem more real than the voice of Israel's prophet, Micah of Moresheth. *Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God!*? Where and when and how? Isn't it all a bit naïve, given what we know about politics in the push-and-shove of the Washingtons of the world?

I recently read the prophet's words, wanting to hear him speak into my heart, into my time and place. The prophet is also a poet, seeing visions of God, human nature, and history all entwined together "during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." Nation against nation, the peoples of the earth and the people of God called to the very high standard of the character of God himself, and judged in history



the Wardrobe, and the yearning for the White Witch's cursed rule, "Always winter, but never Christmas," to finally be overruled by the coming of Aslan into his kingly glory, making all things new and right. All Narnia longed for that, and then, one day, winter finally became Christmas.

My desire was to set before the group of White House staff a vision of vocation that was both honest and hopeful. The spirit of *Syriana* is a perennial temptation, even as the siren call of

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for failing to do what God requires of Everyman and Everywoman, "It is ruined, beyond all remedy," Micah laments. But also there is the clear vision of what will someday be true:

*He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide for strong nations far away;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
but they shall sit every man under his vine and
under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.*

We long for that day. It will surely come. The hard part is living between times, honestly taking account of what *is* in the light of what *ought to be*, believing that someday in history it will be seen and heard, known and experienced, by every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve, viz. "Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings," and there will be no more tears and sadness, evil and injustice, disappointment and grief.

HOPE IN REPAIRING THE RUINS

In the here-and-now, I vote—but always with a torn heart. I have not yet met a candidate or a political proposal that embodies all that I dream for as one whose deepest loyalties are grounded in the hope of the Kingdom. But I do vote. As William Imboden wrote in the *Public Justice Report*, "It is clear that the precepts and practice of proximate justice are deficient when judged by the standards of the City of God, but they may be superior to no justice at all." We take up our responsibility as citizens, realizing that our best efforts are clay-footed, our best insights are flawed. And yet it matters for this earth and the one that it is to come that we work alongside others to establish what Walker Percy called "signposts in a strange land" of what is already

“Corruption charges. CORRUPTION?”

Corruption ain't nothing more than government intrusion into market efficiencies in the form of regulation. That's Milton Friedman. He got a *damn Nobel prize.**

We have laws against it PRECISELY so we can get away with it.

Corruption is our protection. Corruption is what keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are here in the white-hot center of things instead of fighting each other for scraps of meat out there in the streets.

Corruption... is how we win.”

Stephen Gaghan, *Syriana*
(Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005)

real and true and right in the now-but-not-yet of the Kingdom.

To keep on keeping on in our callings is the hard thing. Crucial to that ability is a theological vision shaped by Scripture, one that gives us the cast of heart and mind to understand the frailties of our own selves, as well as those of our societies. And, still, to hope for the reality and meaning of the way things ought to be in every area of life, from painting to play to politics, and on and on and on.

What keeps us going is the possibility of proximate justice—of something rather than nothing—knowing ahead of time that it will never be everything on this side of the consummation. Francis Schaeffer called this the vision and hope of substantial healing, arguing that it was the antidote to the all-or-nothing syndrome that so afflicts us, whether in the most personal parts of life, as with marriage, or the most public, as with political engagement. *I really hoped, I really tried, and it didn't work—so I'm done.* His words have been a great grace to me for a long time. A person can touch and feel something that is substantial; it is real, even if it is not everything—but it is not nothing, either.

My own reflection over the years has also persuaded me that in addition to the vision, those who carry on find teachers who embody the vision. Words must become flesh for us to understand them. It is only as we find mentors who offer us that over-the-shoulder and through-the-heart learning that we begin to “get it.” And finally, those who sustain their commitments time and again embed themselves in communities of kindred spirits where, in Lesslie Newbigin's words, “the congregation becomes the hermeneutic of the gospel in and for the world,” keeping our hearts alive to what matters most. It is one thing to sense a call to political engagement. It is something else altogether to develop the habits of heart that can sustain that call over a lifetime.

When I graduated from college I was given the award for the senior student most concerned for political responsibility. It surprised me, and I was glad—even as I felt the weight of its implication. Years later, I have never run for office, or even worked in a political role, but I have cared about our life together, the *polis*, passionately. That commitment has been a thread through all that I have done vocationally. It still gets me up in the morning, giving me energy to keep trying to care for my culture, as well as cultures all throughout the world. It is the work of repairing the ruins, the calling to act with responsibility for history, hoping for the renewal of all things, even as I know that at my best I am a pilgrim in the ruins.

Even after a lifetime of bumping up against the brokenness of life, seeing and hearing the wounds of both persons and polities, I still believe that the vision of vocations as salt and light—John Stott calls them *affective commodities*, transforming their environments—sends us into the world week by week, year after year, with callings to care about the way things are and ought to be. Bono echoes this vision in his reflection on his own vocation: “I’m a musician. I write songs. I just hope that when the day is done, I’ll have torn a little corner off of the darkness.”

If that can be true of me, of you, then we will have made peace with the doing of proximate justice. And that is not a small thing for people who yearn for the whole cosmos to be made right, and who know that someday it will be. ☐



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HELP ALONG THE WAY

BY BART GARRETT

Shortly after giving up the dream of becoming a lawyer, I was completing my second year of a three-year graduate program in theology. Over summer break, my wife and I spent three weeks in Japan, and we considered joining a church development team in Tokyo. In the span of three years, my vocational trajectory changed drastically, we got married, we moved to a new city where we knew no one, my wife's mother died, and we contemplated becoming career missionaries in a foreign culture.

HOW TO IDENTIFY
HEROES, HOW TO
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