

# Jesus and politics

by Andrew J. Byers



‘God’ and ‘politics’ are two topics we are told to avoid in polite conversation. Yet in the sermon – that mysterious dialogue between preacher, congregation, scripture and our speaking God – these two topics not only belong, but they belong *together*.

Jesus was political, and so was his message. To be clear, he was not a politician. And to co-opt Jesus and force him to fit the brand of whatever contemporary political party best matches the preacher’s civic loyalties would be an exercise in missing the point (and an act of homiletical abuse).

Jesus’ political sensibilities cannot be accommodated by any earthly political ideology or system. Jesus and his gospel are political, but they cannot be conveniently pinned to the bottom of today’s party manifestos. Preachers need not be shy in pairing the topics of theology and politics on Sunday mornings, but we do need to be *wise*. In what follows, we will look at political themes appearing in the four canonical Gospels to gain wisdom for preaching the politics of Jesus with energy and urgency, and also with faithfulness to the text.

## POLITICS IN THE BIRTH NARRATIVES: ‘IN THOSE DAYS CAESAR AUGUSTUS ISSUED A DECREE...’ (LUKE 2:1)

We have just emerged from Advent, a time many preachers dread because of the struggle to find fresh material after years of preaching from those same few chapters in Matthew and Luke. But how often do we notice as preachers the political themes sewn into the threads of those birth narratives? Matthew opens with ‘This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham...’ (1:1). This introduction to the Gospel’s main character is explicitly political. ‘Messiah’ and ‘Son of David’ are royal titles densely freighted with the political hopes of first century Jews living under

the reign of other kings. Though Abraham comes first in the biblical story, it is the political affiliation with David that Matthew emphasises.

This emphasis continues as the evangelist repeats the number ‘fourteen’ throughout the genealogy. The most biblically savvy in our congregations might do their research and expose Matthew’s numbering as faulty – the genealogy seems a bit patchy in places. But that observation would miss a clever literary trick. Since letters of the alphabet were often assigned numerical values in ancient languages, names could be represented by numbers (think ‘666’ which was probably intended to represent the emperor Nero). Fourteen happens to be the number of the name ‘David,’ the most legendary of Israel’s kings. Matthew’s powerful political point is that, at long last,





through times when providence was imperceptible ('...Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon...' Matthew 1:10), the one true King has finally appeared... just at the right time.

The arrival of a rightful king is a threat to anyone wearing a crown. Hence the dread of Herod and the destabilisation of Jerusalem's political scene when the Magi appeared, asking 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?' (2:2). Herod had been officially dubbed 'king of the Jews,' but by pagan political decree (compliments of the Romans). Zion's throne was not his by birthright. The inquiry of these wise men, their sacks weighted with kingly gifts, sent fissures into the Jewish political establishment (which Herod sought to patch by dispatching soldiers to Bethlehem).

There is a hint, though, that the political aspirations of this newborn ruler would not meet the standard expectations: 'You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' (1:21).

From *what* will he save them? The Romans? Parthians? The tax system? Overbearing Greek culture?

This king will save his people 'from their sins.'

Sins.

Cosmic darkness.

And do not forget the devil, whom Jesus faces a few episodes later in Matthew 4.

The arsenal of earthly kings – the sharpened points of a thousand spears, the honed edges of ten thousand swords – are useless against such powers. A different sort of political power is emerging.

Luke is also keen to open his Gospel with politically charged commentary. Significant events in the arrival of Jesus are situated alongside the political realities of the day: 'In the time of Herod king of Judea...' (1:5); '...this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria' (2:2); and then 'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his

brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene' (3:1-2).

Amidst such rulers and reigns, an angelic warrior proclaims to a teenage girl in no uncertain terms that she is about to give birth to one whose reign will outlast all others: 'The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end' (1:32b-33).

As in Matthew, the advent of such a royal figure threatens every other crown. The teenage girl sings that God 'has brought down rulers from their thrones' (1:52). In a Jewish context pregnant with expectations for deliverance, with old men and women in the Temple longing for 'the consolation of Israel' and praying for the 'redemption of Jerusalem,' such political talk was enough to stoke the wildest of hopes.

Can we preach politics from the birth stories of Jesus? Yes! But the narratives that follow these Gospel openings clarify just what sort of politics this royal child brings...



JESUS AND HIS GOSPEL ARE POLITICAL, BUT THEY CANNOT BE CONVENIENTLY PINNED TO THE BOTTOM OF TODAY'S PARTY MANIFESTOS.

## THE POLITICAL GOSPEL: 'THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD' (MARK 1:1)

The most fundamental work of the preacher is to proclaim the gospel. In the ancient world, *euangelion* was a media term. 'Gospel' was the 'Hear ye, hear ye' in the town square followed by an announcement of political import: 'Hurrah! It's Caesar's birthday!' or 'Our heroic Roman general has won the victory!' In the Old Testament, the proclamation of gospel is the joyful pronouncement through the quivering lips of a runner, panting from his hard pace from the fields of war, that the battle is won and deliverance has come (2 Samuel 18:20-27; Isaiah 40:9; 52:7).

'Gospel,' therefore, is a political term. And if the gospel lies at the heart of all good preaching, then the best sermons have political implications.

When Mark opens his story of Jesus with the word 'gospel,' now the name of these stories about Jesus in our Bibles, he is unabashedly making a political statement. There is One, and One alone, with the royal power to rescue, deliver, and walk away from ultimate conflict as Victor. Of all the gospel proclamations throughout the Roman Empire showcasing imperial might, Mark proclaims a gospel of an unarmed hero whose victory banner is a discarded gravecloth.

## JESUS AS POLITICAL PREACHER: '...THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR' (MATTHEW 4:17)

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus begins his public ministry with preaching (Matthew 1:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:14-15). A pertinent question for us preachers is surely 'What did *Jesus* preach?'

Answer: the Empire of God.

Jesus' gospel proclaimed rescue through a new political realm that is now live on the scene and impinging on the world.

To preach the gospel is to proclaim the arrival of another kingdom. But for Jesus' hearers – and for the evangelists' readers – a good deal of unlearning and reacclimation had to take place before the nature of this divine empire could be understood. Through parables, discourses and dialogues, it becomes clear that this kingdom is of a different sort. Unlike other kingdoms, the kingdom of God does not necessarily displace existing political domains (Luke 17:20-21). It is an empire that embeds itself amidst other kingdoms, insinuating itself into minds, hearts, and societal structures suggesting an alternative ethic premised on an alternative logic and value system. This is a kingdom not sourced in mortal machinations or earthly efforts but in heaven and its culture of worship and service to One who sits on the throne above all thrones.

## JESUS' POLITICAL DEATH... AND THE IRRELEVANCE OF DIVINE POLITICS? 'MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD' (JOHN 18:36)

This embedded kingdom cannot be sufficiently understood until Jesus, the victor of gospel proclamation, the herald of the Empire of God, is nailed naked to a cross. Jesus dies the death of a political criminal. Sedition is the charge. In one of history's cruelest forms of irony, anyone who raised himself (it was usually a 'him') against Rome, Rome raised up – literally – on wooden posts, elevating him high up so all could see the consequences of any wild political dreaming.

What sort of 'king' is this? What sort of 'kingdom'? What sort of political vision?

Those with the echoes of Mary's song still lingering in their ears, those recalling the words of the old folks in the Temple, those remembering that day when the Persian sages showed up at the palace causing a stir – these might be forgiven if, while stealing glances up at Golgotha, something died inside their hearts, convinced by nail and beam that their most luxurious hopes had been splintered by that cross. As Cleopas forlornly quips a few days later along the Emmaus road, 'we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21).

Note the past tense: 'we had hoped...' Maybe Jesus' political talk was all just symbolic. Maybe what he really came to do was to lift our minds above the mundane institutional realities of human politics. Maybe his political teaching was merely escapist, at best a handful of charming and quotable ideals that can be attained only symbolically or spiritually. Having read that Jesus' kingly rule ultimately assaults the forces of darkness and takes away sins, it is tempting to think of his political message as merely 'spiritual,' thus having little relevance when it comes to governing institutions, entrenched social problems, and in the way we live out our mundane lives in the day-to-day.<sup>1</sup>

Again, what sort of 'king' is this? What sort of 'kingdom'? What sort of political vision?

When Jesus stood as prisoner near the end of John's Gospel, Pilate charged him to recognise the unassailable political might arrayed against him. But Jesus said 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above' (John 19:11). It was a bold reply, and it certainly put the Roman governor on edge. Yet if Jesus' political domain is a kingdom 'not of this world' (John 18:36), does it have any material bearing on Brexit? The Trump administration? Gender politics? Immigration policy?

## PREACHING POLITICS FROM THE GOSPELS: 'ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME' (MATTHEW 28:18)

Capital punishment is the ultimate weapon of political power. But what does it mean for imperial politics when execution only has a temporary effect on the preacher of the Empire of God? When a political authority executes a king who shows up again three days later, its earthly limits are exposed. The resurrection signals the unending nature of the divine kingdom premised on the unkillable nature of its king (well, actually he can be killed... it just doesn't work for more than a few days).

It also signals that Jesus' political vision cannot be assigned mere spiritual or symbolic worth. And if an enfleshed divine ruler reappears after death still enfleshed, it is a profound statement that matter *matters*, that the daily grind is important, that the Kingdom of God is substance amidst the contingencies and limits of material life. The Word became flesh, and the kingdom is in our midst. The politics of the resurrected Christ cannot be spiritualised.

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## PREACHING POLITICS JESUS-STYLE

So if Jesus is a political figure (a king) with a political message (the proclamation of an alternative kingdom) that cannot be confined to the clouds even if it is 'not of this world', how might we preach and proclaim the political vision of the four Gospels?

Here are a few suggestions by way of application:

### **In the politics of Jesus, ultimate hope cannot be placed in earthly institutions.**

Today's political parties are promising us the moon. Brexiteers promise this, Remainers promise that. Conservatives and Liberals alike cast a vision of doom if voters chose the platforms of their opponents. Even those political agendas that seem most aligned with the values of Christ's kingdom end up diluted by scandal or by a secular self-righteousness leading to

destructive rage. Earthly institutions and platforms cannot be idealised. Jesus was simply unimpressed with earthly political power ('give back to Caesar what is Caesar's' Luke 20:25). The devil tempted him with all the political power of the globe and Jesus said, 'Not interested' (paraphrased). The halls of power are infested with the cosmic evil only the reign of God can disperse. Yet preachers and congregations throughout the land are easily tempted, if given the opportunity to cosy up to those in power. Jesus knew that emperors and tetrarchs, client kings and governors, wielded all sorts of clout that could not unchain the bonds of sin any more than they could seal up emptied tombs.

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### **In the politics of Jesus, earthly institutions are nonetheless important.**

Just as evil can be systemically embedded within the structures of society, so can the Kingdom of God, the divine reign that is in our midst and drawing near, infiltrating political establishments as secretly sown seeds. Like salt, leaven, and those seeds, God's kingdom can enter the cracks of local and national governments and bring light into the creaking systems of earthly power. The kingdom not-of-this-world can get into this world, just like the Word can become flesh and dwell among us.

### **In the politics of Jesus, Bethlehem and Nazareth matter as much as Jerusalem and Rome.**

Jesus was not impressed with Jerusalem's gleaming stones and golden spires. Rome was not in his travel daydreams. The unending kingdom of the world's true Lord showed up in backwater villages, in smelly fishing boats, in fields full of sheep and grain. This kingdom that draws near does not just draw near to London, Berlin, or Washington, D.C. A kingdom that is in our midst is also in Spennymoor, Croydon, Kennesaw, Georgia and Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

Preach the gospel, oh preacher.  
Preach the Kingdom of God. And in doing so, you will be preaching the politics of Jesus.

1. See the critique of this view in John Howard Yoder's now classic work, *The Politics of Jesus* (2nd Ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994 [1972]), 4–8.

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