

Why on earth should we preach about politics?

And if we should – how should we do it?

by Doug Gay



This is a question that makes many preachers nervous. In this article I want to explore some ways of framing the question which can help us to address it and to grow in confidence as preachers – unafraid, unabashed and unapologetic about our calling to be political in the pulpit.

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PREACHING ON BREXIT? WE ARE FORBIDDEN TO ENDORSE RACISM OR PREJUDICE AND REQUIRED TO DEAL JUSTLY WITH FOREIGNERS IN THE LAND

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PREACHING WITHIN THE *MISSIO DEI*

The first and most comprehensive frame I put around preaching is a missional one. I find perspectives built around the language of *missio dei* helpful, but if you are allergic to that, stick with ‘mission’. There is mission, David Bosch says, because God loves people.¹ Not only does God love the world, but I find it deeply poignant and powerful to reinforce this with the words of the Book of Common Prayer Ash Wednesday Collect, ‘Almighty and Everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made’. God made the universe in love and wills its good in every moment of its existence – wills our good, and our neighbour’s, and our enemy’s. The primal mission of humanity is revealed in the Genesis sending to ‘be fruitful’ and ‘multiply on the earth’ (9:7) and should be read, as Walter Brueggemann reminds us, alongside the wonderful permission ‘you are free to eat from any tree in the garden’ (2:16). Both of these open up the way in which our primal sending is a sending into life, by a God who says to us: ‘Go and live!’

The work of God in redemption, in salvation is in profound, loving continuity with the work of God in creation. We are called to preach a Word of Life, commissioned by the Lord who says ‘I have come that they may have life in all its fullness.’ If John 10:10 is any kind of hermeneutical cue for us as preachers and if we have any kind of Genesis-shaped theological and homiletical imagination, then when we are preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are always preaching ‘towards life’.²

If we begin with the God of love and life, then our preaching will be unavoidably, unashamedly, unrepentantly political, just because the true end of a just politics is life in all its fullness for all who God loves.



IN THE HERE AND NOW

Sunday by Sunday, preachers are called upon to speak to these faces, in these spaces, in this moment. The Northern Irish theologian and preacher Derek Poole taught me to ask this question which he and his congregation learned during the Troubles: ‘What name of God do we cry out in this situation?’ Sam Wells taught me that the scriptures train us in the skill of naming the presence of God. These two thoughts came together in 2017 when I was preparing to speak on Jeremiah 1. My pre-perception of the passage was entirely focused around verse 6 of the call vision – ‘I do not know how to speak; I am too young.’ But as I re-read the text, I was caught by the question of verse 11 – ‘The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “What do you see, Jeremiah?”’ Now that is a question for preachers. One to be read with the New Testament open at Matthew 25 and some Bob Dylan playing in the background: ‘How many times can a

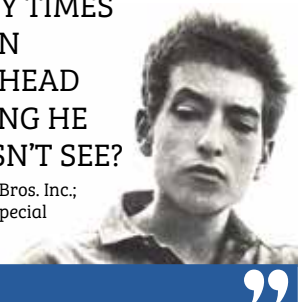
man turn his head pretending he just doesn’t see?’ As preachers we are called to be see-ers as well as speakers. If we let the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see the world, to see the lives of people in the world – above all, to see the lives of the poor, the marginalised, the put-down and put-upon... see if that doesn’t make a political preacher of you.

We are preachers, after all, in the service of the God of Exodus, the God who says to Israel in Egypt: ‘I have seen your pain, I have heard your cries, I know your suffering, I have come down to deliver you.’

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HOW MANY TIMES
CAN A MAN
TURN HIS HEAD
PRETENDING HE
JUST DOESN’T SEE?

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OK – BUT HOW?

I am guessing that most of you are saying 'Amen' so far, but are also still holding all of your reservations about the 'how' of this, in the face of Brexit referenda, General Elections, Elections to the Scottish Parliament, or to the Welsh, Northern Irish or London Assemblies.

Here then, in no particular order, are ten thoughts about how to actually do this in the realpolitik world.

- ✓ Easiest I know if you are a lectionary or consecutive expository preacher... but *read the text closely and expound the text clearly*. If we really are expository, scripture will politicise us. Often and very often – simply putting the key questions and concerns of a passage on stage in a sermon will be a deeply political act.
- ✓ Remember, whenever church folk are faced with a vote, or a political choice, there are *bidden* and *forbidden motivations* for disciples of Jesus Christ and these should be preached with passion and clarity. As someone whose support for a YES vote in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum was well known, with some NO voting congregation members anxious about whether I would 'abuse' the pulpit – I preached on bidden and forbidden motivations. All of us were bidden to be good stewards of our cultural inheritance – and we were forbidden to endorse any kind of nationalism which endorses national superiority or exceptionalism. Preaching on Brexit? We are forbidden to endorse racism or prejudice and required to deal justly with foreigners in the land. Preaching in a General, National or Local Election? We are forbidden to make political choices on the basis of selfishness, bidden by the same Philippians 2 to vote 'kenotically' looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others.
- ✓ It is sometimes a mark of faithfulness, if not to tell people from the pulpit who to vote for, to *call for people to vote against something*. Faced with support for slavery in 1860s America, support for Hitler in 1930s Germany, support for Apartheid in 1940s-1990s South Africa, support for the National Front or Britain First or the English Defence League in 1980s-2018 UK – pulpits which failed to denounce those causes were failing pulpits. Sometimes the pulpit is a megaphone and we should use it or be damned.
- ✓ Where it is not appropriate to tell people how to vote or who to vote for – which will very often be the case – preachers should live into our precious vocation of *raising troubling questions* from the text. Here is one case in which the great homiletician Fred Craddock's sense of preaching *As One Without Authority* may be highly relevant. Of course people will bristle at being 'told', by the likes of us. So we raise thoughtful questions, we wonder aloud about troubling issues, we recognise daunting challenges – with the proviso that we too are genuinely daunted by these, are troubled and perplexed by these. There has been a 25% rise in deaths among homeless people in 2017-18. Lord when did we see you homeless?
- ✓ *Preaching can be a site of deep attentiveness*. What do you see? Think of Jesus sitting down opposite the Temple treasury and watching as people put in their gifts. A sermon can be a way of sitting down opposite some reality and 'watching' it together. Jesus' response to the poor widow required not just the 'thin' knowledge of how much each giver gave, but the 'thick' knowledge of how much each giver had. Sermon time is precious time in which preachers are trusted, in their conversation with scripture, to direct the attention of the Christian community. What we pay attention to is a deeply political question.
- ✓ *Preaching should always lead the church into prayer*. In particular, liturgical preaching (done within the context of worship) should very often be part of a journey towards intercession or lament or celebration. To move our political concerns and dilemmas into prayer, is to insist they cannot simply stay in self-righteous indignation, or vehement denunciation or uncritical cheerleading. They must be tested before the throne of grace, before the eyes and ears of the Servant King, before the Maker who loves all people and hates all injustice.
- ✓ *Preaching, because it happens in church, may actually be happening in a good place to talk politics*. I increasingly think that political parties may be very bad places to talk about politics. I find it interesting that so many election hustings in the UK still happen in church buildings. I wonder if we are so used to being critical of our own churches, that we fail to see they may not be the worst places to talk politics. A talk-back session after a sermon might be a great way of living into this and of demonstrating that although our voice may be called and trusted to preach, it is only one voice and a political conversation needs all our voices.
- ✓ *Preaching is always already a political act anyway*. There are no views from nowhere, no theology from nowhere, no sermons from nowhere. All of our theology is political and all of our politics is theological. In my day job teaching practical theology and working with candidates for recognised ministries, we talk a lot about 'reflective practice' and 'reflexivity'. We need preaching and preachers, praying for grace to know ourselves, to see ourselves, to know where we are located on power maps, income maps, incidence of crime maps, housing condition maps. We have an accent, an ethnicity, a gender, a sexual

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orientation, an income bracket, a class identity, a level of physical and mental (dis)ability and health – locally, nationally and globally. In the light of 1 Peter 4:17, we might say that political judgment begins with the house of God.

- ✓ *Preaching should always be done in hope.* We preach in the hope that God has elected preaching to play a part in the *missio dei*, in the belief that the Spirit uses our often stumbling and half-baked offerings to transform people, to awaken people, to heal and save and help people, to comfort and challenge. Our preaching about politics might bring people together, might unite people,

might be used by God to enable faithful discipleship and even sometimes, as Ched Myers might say, to bind the strong man...

- ✓ *Preaching about politics, like all preaching, calls for humility.* We might want to remember David Bosch’s lovely phrase ‘bold humility’, but it is humility all the same. We don’t know it all, or understand it all. We all, as the Epistle of James says, make many mistakes. Many of us are troublingly compromised in trying to follow the Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head and who the common people heard gladly. So this will have to be humble preaching for many of us.

As so often in writing about preaching, at the end I find myself even more daunted by this calling we share. Who is able for this? I pray God will make us more able to engage in this aspect of what Duncan Forrester once called ‘the political service of theology’.

1. Bosch 1991, 392
2. WCC 2013

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