

WHY THE GOSPEL MUST BE POLITICAL

MARTIN CAMROUX

One of the most vital questions we have to ask about the gospel is how much of life it applies to? Unquestionably it is about individual life. I was visiting someone in hospital the other week and as I so often do I read reading to them from the Psalms: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". "The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid". In those moments of personal crisis there certainly is a power and a hope and a courage that comes out of the gospel. In all sorts of ways the gospel gives hope and meaning to us as we seek to live our lives.

But what if you look beyond individual lives to the affairs of the world. What about the world of the homeless, the world of war and violence, of poverty, the world of governments and parliaments? Surely about such matters too the gospel has something to say. God does not simply belong in one corner of life. Today I want to look at the social gospel, the gospel as it relates to social and political need.

To start us off let's look at the Book of Jeremiah is a good place to start. Jeremiah is a great prophet of the inner life and personal. He talks of that time when God will write a new covenant in the heart. You don't get more personal than that. But equally he recognises this wider social gospel. "Thus says the Lord: Go down to the house of the King and speak there this word". The King in question is Jehoiakim, son of Josiah. He built great palaces with forced labour. He was unjust, corrupt. Jeremiah is to challenge him face to face. "Act with justice and righteousness... deliver the oppressed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place".

For Jeremiah it is not just that he finds what is going on in his country unendurable. It is the word of the Lord that drives him on. "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice... Do you think you are a King because you compete in cedar? Did not your father do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Is not this to know me says the Lord".

If you want to sum up what Jeremiah is saying in one sentence it is this. To know God is to do justice. In this Jeremiah is not alone. In the prophets of Israel there came as never before a consciousness of God as a God of justice and righteousness. Amos "Let justice flow like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream". So Micah "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God". Isaiah "Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow". Pursue justice, guide the oppressed, uphold the rights of the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause". When Jesus begins his ministry he takes a text from Isaiah, "The spirit of the lord is upon me. He has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to let the broken victims go free". Later he talks of the homeless and the hungry and the prisoner and he says "in as much as did it unto the least of these my brothers you did it unto me".

In the Bible religion is never simply about individual need it is about social need as well. As Desmond Tutu said "I am puzzled about which Bible people are reading when they say religion and politics don't mix". "Thus said the Lord go to the house of the King" he word of

the Lord came, go to the palace." He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Is not this to know me says the Lord". It could hardly be clearer.

So there is a social gospel. But we need to be careful to define what it is and what it is not. The text says we are to go to the house of the king. It doesn't say we are to stay there and run the place. During the Vietnam years, William Sloane Coffin, then chaplain of Yale University was able to get an appointment with a few other ministers to meet with the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. The exchange grew rather heated, and finally, in exasperation, Kissinger said to Coffin, "All right, how would you get the boys home from Vietnam?" Bill Coffin, never one to leave a question unanswered, responded, "Mr. Kissinger, our job is to proclaim that justice must roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Your job, Mr. Kissinger, is to work out the details of the irrigation system."

It is not the job of the Church to run the government. There are all sorts of technical questions about which the Christian has no particular authority to speak. On many questions Christians differ. There is no one Christian way of doing politics. But at the heart of the gospel is a simple belief. That every human being is made in the image of God and therefore of value. Therefore there are to be treated with respect and dignity. The whole Christian social gospel comes out of that belief.

Listen again to Jeremiah "and say "Deal justly and fairly, rescue the victim, do not ill-treat and use violence towards the alien, the fatherless and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood". That's the basic Christian involvement. Suppose from this pulpit I was to propose to the problem of the railways. That would be quite outside my area of competence. You might think it is also outside the area of competence of the government as well but that would be another question. If however if I talk about human need and human dignity that is exactly what Jeremiah did long ago and the Church must always do if it believes that what happens to people matters to God.

Take 2 examples - Firstly world poverty. Today 1.3 billion people live in what is defined as absolute poverty. Half of humanity has no sanitation; over a billion don't have access to clean water. Millions of children don't get a chance of education or have any basic access to healthcare. 500,000 women a year die in childbirth and millions are permanently disabled as the result of the lack of very simple interventions. That creates poverty and suffering. One in five of us are living in those sorts of conditions.

I think it is the greatest moral issue of our time. Now we are making progress. In our church two weeks ago Tom Brake told us that it took from the Stone Age to 1950 for human life expectancy to rise from 20 to 40. From 1950 to now it has risen from 40 to 60.

People despair too much. More people have come out of poverty in the last 50 years than at any point in the history of humanity. Now when it comes to this great titanic struggle to bring humanity to the time when as Isaiah says, "No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days" how could we talk about the love of God and not be concerned with how governments meet this priority? "Thus says the Lord go down to the house of the King". This is Christian politics of an unmistakable kind.

Or take a second example. If we believe that every human being is a child of God it follows that racism is affront to the Christian gospel. As Paul said "God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth". That point would be fundamental to all our main three political parties

in this country. But there is one party who not accept, that is the British National Party, The BNP. The BNP is a racist party out of a Nazi tradition. Its leader is on record as denying the holocaust saying that Hitler never hurt anyone. Its candidates include people with criminal convictions for violence, terrorism, and football hooliganism. Its youth leader recently had to resign after admitting on television that he admired Hitler and wished he'd lived in Nazi Germany. In their pubs they sing Nazi marching songs. The BNP wishes to ban all immigration into the computer and use the overseas aid budget to persuade black people to leave. Its says all asylum seekers should be expelled because they are all either bogus or ought to be somewhere else. Its slogan is "Help win Britain back for the British".

You may argue what immigration policy should be, you may argue about procedures for asylum, - there are no simple Christian answers to those questions- but this kind of racism is quite unacceptable. It violates the fundamental core of Christian belief.

The Christian social gospel comes down to this. There is one God and therefore one human family and that is how we must treatment. Last week was the 75th birthday of someone who saw this more clearly than most, Dr Martin Luther King. He said this "The gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial".

"Thus says the Lord: Go down to the house of the King and speak there this word. Act with justice and righteousness... deliver the oppressed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan or the widow, nor shed innocent blood".

*Rev'd. Martin Camroux MA
Trinity Church, Sutton
(United Reformed/Methodist)
Cheam Road, Sutton, SM1 1DZ*