

My Neighbour, My Vote

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 8 May 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr David Gill

Easter 4C

Amos 7: 7-9; 1 John 4: 7-12; Luke 10: 25-37;

Contemporary Reading: *The Noise of Politics* – Walter Brueggemann

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script prepared by David. The reader is Elizabeth Watson because David has Covid 19.

Today we have departed from the readings set in the lectionary. Why? Because this country is about to choose its national leadership. The federal election campaign is almost upon us. We have important decisions to make. And, as Christians, we have serious thinking to do.

Today's Bible readings might help.

A few minutes ago we heard from Amos. He was a prophet, called to speak truth to the movers and shakers of his day. It was a time of prosperity. People were comfortable. They saw this as evidence of God's blessing. But ... they weren't sharing their prosperity with the poor. They were religious. But their religion did not flow on into the nation's relationships. Faith was not finding expression in social justice.

The prophet has a vision involving a plumb line – a length of string with a weight tied to it, used to check whether a wall had been built straight. The wall, here, represents Israel. Measured against the plumb line of God's will, Israel is found to be warped, out of alignment. So judgement is in prospect.

"Let justice roll down like waters," Amos had written a couple of chapters earlier, *"and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."*

From justice in our first reading, the other readings took us to its close relation, love. The story of the good Samaritan is one of the best known passages in the Bible.

Jesus has just made an important point: love of God and love of neighbour is what life is all about. Then comes the question: *"Who is my neighbour?"* Jesus' story is a double-barrelled response. First answer: the neighbour is the person, any person, who is in need. But then Jesus reverses the question: who behaved like a neighbour? Answer to that: the man – incidentally a Samaritan, a despised outsider, a person of another faith -- who saw the other's need and did something about it.

The double-edged implication is clear. Painfully clear. Inescapably clear. Mark Twain once said *"It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts I do understand"*. The Samaritan story is one we all understand. Right? Though we sometimes wish we didn't. Right??

Justice and love. Two imperatives of the Christian faith. What might they imply for us as, on Saturday week, we line up for our date with democracy?

I'm not going to tell you who you should vote for. That's not my job. But I am going to ask you to think about how the Christian faith may bear upon your vote. That is my job.

The key word is -- think! In the run up to an election, complex issues get trivialized. As the American writer H L Mencken warned: "*To every human problem there is a solution that is simple, neat – and wrong!*" So, think.

Eight points to factor into your thinking:

1. Don't just ask which party's policies might advantage you or your family. Admittedly, we're not offered a lot of choice this time around, but there are some options. Australia's Catholic bishops have issued a statement entitled "*Towards a Better Kind of Politics*". Look beyond self-interest, their statement urges, and "*use your vote for the good of all*". Wise advice, not only for Christians.
2. As you consider the common good, bear in mind what Amos had to say – not just Amos, the entire prophetic stream – about the importance of social justice. Justice for the poor, the forgotten, the stranger in our midst. Our efforts for justice will always be imperfect. But the God-given goal stands ever before us. How are we to press towards that goal amid the stubborn realities of today, through the process of collective decision-making called politics? It's complicated. So ...
3. Draw on the wisdom of the church. You're not struggling with this alone. Beware noisy groups like the right-wing Australian Christian Lobby, which purports to represent the churches when actually it doesn't.

Of course, the churches don't always get things right either, but they are sources of help. The Uniting Church and the Roman Catholic Church, especially, have competent people advising them on social justice issues. They're worth listening to and learning from.

4. Don't forget the saga of the good Samaritan. Justice matters, but there is more to following Jesus than political activism. So many encounters in the gospels involve simple acts of mercy. As St Paul might have written, but unfortunately didn't: *I may support all the right causes, I might turn up for all the right demonstrations, I may vote for all the right candidates, but if I have not love I am nothing.*

Love is our calling, no matter who governs in Canberra. Mercy can mitigate even the worst injustice – think slavery, and the difference kindness by a slave owner could make. And without mercy, even the best social order can be a soulless bureaucracy. Justice and love: each is different, both are vital.

5. Earth your thinking in the real world. Politics is the art of the possible. Be realistic in what you expect from the state. Faced with armed conflict, for example, an individual may well opt for pacifism, unconditional love. But that choice is not open to a government charged with the nation's defence. Faced with one asylum seeker needing help, simple compassion is the way to go. Faced with tens of millions, as governments are now, simple compassion is not an option. Difficult judgements and painful compromises cannot be avoided.

What compassion requires of me is one thing. What might be the best policy achievable for the nation is quite another. Political ethics involves weighing options that are open to the collective, not those we may espouse as individuals. Lose sight of that distinction, as church people sometimes do, and we render ourselves irrelevant to national decision-making.

6. Remember that political differences are always between flawed human beings, never between sinners on one side and saints on the other. That recognition should mitigate self-righteousness and vindictiveness - not least on the internet. It should take the sting out of how people deal with their opponents. And it ought to make us wary of extremist language of all kinds.

So use whatever opportunities come your way to inject civility into Australia's political debate. Keep telling yourself, and anyone else who will listen, that if your candidate wins, it won't produce a perfect Australia. And if he or she loses, it's probably not the end of the world. Faith in God means, among other things, keeping politics in perspective.

7. Do not join the chorus of those who rubbish politicians. I know some make it difficult, but try to be grateful for those who offer themselves for public office. Members of parliament have a thankless task with atrocious hours, a dreadful public image, collateral damage to families and no job security whatsoever. Men and women who put their hands up for election deserve better than to be met with cynicism. Be thankful for them. Pray for them. And mean it.

8. Do not confuse all this with the good news of the gospel. The good news is not that you and I are going to strive for social justice or turn ourselves into good Samaritans. At the end of the day, all such efforts, we know, will prove inadequate. That knowledge won't stop us from trying, of course, but the defects in us - and therefore in our politics and policies, our compassion and caring - will remain. The justice of God's kingdom keeps pressing upon us, but its fullness remains ever beyond us. That's the sobering news.

The good news is not about us at all, but about the mysterious Reality that embraces us in life and death. Remember, we're still in the season of Easter. Than which there could be no better time for a federal election!

For Easter reminds us of a divine mercy able to overcome the contradictions and failures that we cannot. It tells us that beyond our guilt, there is grace. Beyond our failure, hope. Beyond our sin, the ever-present possibility of a new beginning.

That is what we celebrate. That, whether people know it or not, is good news indeed. For the nation as a whole. For those who are going to find themselves members of the next federal parliament. And for those of us whose votes are going to put them there.

For love so great, so deep, so true; for the mercy that overarches all our years -
thanks be to God.