

LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

SERMON: Sunday 12th April 2015

Rev'd David R. Coaker

Readings: John 20.19-31; Acts 4.32-35

Address

To begin with a thought on each of our Bible readings:

Firstly in our gospel reading we have it written as clear as day, Thomas' nickname was 'the twin', so why do we call him 'Doubting Thomas'? And why do we always make out doubting is such a bad thing?

Secondly our reading from Acts, a thought for all those that claim that politics and religion don't mix, here we have the early church behaving like card-carrying communists. No personal possessions or property, all held in common, and distributed based on need.

As you may have noticed we're in the middle of an election campaign, so I'll expand on the last thought first.

Religion and politics are intimately bound as they are both human activities. How we as humans try to make sense of the world and give it order has both religious and political elements. Religion is how we organise faith, how we put structure around a sense that there is more to life than what we can see, touch, hear, taste or smell.

Politics is how we structure our communities, how we bind individuals together as villages, towns, cities and nations.

Politics is about governing, about how we organise ourselves, about putting a structure in place that allows the vast majority to place their trust in a few to ensure the wellbeing of all. As a word, politics has its root in the Greek, polis; which is more than just Glaswegian for Her Majesty's Constabulary.

Polis was the name of the ancient Greek city-states. It was the name of the city, but it was also the name of the people who lived there, the name of the body of citizens that bound themselves together for the good of each other, and against those outside of their walls.

As residents within the United Kingdom we are both citizens and subjects of the Queen, but it is through our local councillors and members of parliament that we express our nationhood, that we live out the politics we have inherited.

So, in and of itself, politics is a useful tool to help us live our lives. It's a background activity that we delegate to others to sort out for us whilst we're doing other things. It's something that is always there, keeping things ticking over for us and for when we directly need it. Politics is the thing that defines and maintains our rights.

It's the thing that ensures we won't be locked up without a fair trial, that people who act against the wellbeing of all are brought to account, that provides for education, welfare, healthcare, policing, the armed forces, and that underwrites the proof that we exist by issuing birth, marriage and death certificates, driving licences etc. For the vast majority of the time politics just happens unnoticed, supporting our daily lives and enabling us to get on with what we want to do.

But just as it ensures our rights, it also places responsibilities upon us. Just as politics supports our rights it also places limitations upon us in the form of responsibilities. We all want to receive the benefits of being part of this nation, but we also have the responsibility to act within the structure our politics gives us.

If we want the safety-net of healthcare, welfare, policing or the armed forces; if we want our young people to be educated, then we should contribute our fair share into the system and not abuse it.

If we want those that act against the common good to be brought to account, then we have a responsibility to act for the common good.

And if we want the right for our opinion to be heard, then we need to engage with the political process. The very least we can do is actually turn up and vote on May 7th, either by posting a letter, or attending a polling station, and placing an X on one or two bits of paper.

Is that too much to ask for all of the rights and benefits that living in this nation offers us?

There is no excuse not to vote. So go and do it when the time comes.

Whatever the arguments about the bland, disconnected, and self-interested party politics we have, it is still our responsibility to take part.

People bled and died for the right to vote to be given to every citizen, whatever their status or gender, so take part in the process.

As long as there is apathy from the electorate we will have apathy returned from those elected. If we are engaged then those we elect will become engaged with us. Change only happens when people try to do something about it.

So that is my first response to our readings – on the 7th May vote. My main concern is that you do vote, but my prayer is that you will take notice of what is being said and written in this campaign and ask yourself which person, what party, best reflects to you the kind of world God dreams of?

That is the point at which religion and politics mix. Our faith, what we believe about how the world is, and what it could be, should inform the way we want our society ordered. When the prevailing belief was that God sat apart from the world, placing divine authority on individuals, the vast majority suffered under dictatorships seeking the good of the few rather than the many.

The prevailing view now is that God is intimately connected to everything. That the spark of God resides within all life, connects all life, is the heartbeat of the universe, and the mind of God is beyond and within all that is and ever will be. The fancy word for this is Panentheism, but it can be summed up in words spoken by Paul later in Acts: 'God in whom we live and move and have our being.'

So how did we move from one view of God to another? Well, that's where doubt comes in.

During Lent a group of us have been exploring a study course called 'Emergence Christianity' with input from Phylis Tyckle a writer on spirituality and religious issues. Underlying her thought is the observation that every 500 years Christianity has undergone a great upheaval and after each we have held on to the treasures we rediscovered from our past and sought to discover where we would place authority.

At around 500AD the Roman Empire fell, 1000AD the Church divided into East and West, 1500AD was the Reformation, and we are undergoing another one now.

We could see in these cycles the build up of doubt about the status quo, the breaking of the status quo, and then the establishing of a new status quo.

Doubt is healthy and helpful. When you see a puddle, you walk around it. You have your doubts about how deep it is, and how waterproof your footwear is. When someone knocks on the door to sell you something you have your doubts about their authenticity, and what they've noticed about your house you've missed.

Doubt is a good thing. Doubt stops us from running headlong into the unknown. It gives us pause to determine the best course of action, the right words to say, or whether something needs to happen at all.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is an integral part of faith. Faith is putting our trust in an ultimately indescribable, indefinable, intangible, understanding of reality to which we place the name God. The word God is itself unsatisfactory, but it's the least-worst word we, in our culture and age, can use.

We take leaps of faith because we are placing our trust in a sense that there is a reality beyond what we can see, touch, hear, taste or smell. A step forward on ground we know is solid isn't a leap of faith. A leap of faith is a step into the fundamentally unknown, but we trust we will land in God's hands.

Faith grounds us in trusting God, and doubts help us try to make sense of our faith. We try to put some structure around our faith by proposing beliefs. Beliefs are how we try to organise our faith and doubt helps us to come up with them, and doubt also helps us when beliefs we hold begin to act against our wellbeing.

Which is why our response to today's gospel shouldn't be 'poor old Thomas', it should be to celebrate Thomas as a hero of the faith. Which, by the way he was. There are still Christians today in India who draw their origin from Thomas. Many of us today would have our doubts about journeying to India, let alone two thousand years ago by foot, horse, boat, with no certainty of arriving, and no real idea of what reception he would receive.

Thomas' doubts were completely understandable; all he had was the word of a group of recently grieving and scared disciples now delusional and raving. It was understandable because in the story the risen Christ makes a point of appearing to Thomas as well.

But note that even though Thomas says to the disciples he'll only believe if he touches Jesus' hand and side, when Jesus appears he immediately responds "My Lord and my God!"

We could not ask for a better example of discipleship.

Doubt keeps our faith healthy and real. It keeps us open to new understandings, to change, to fresh insight, to being renewed by God's Spirit.

The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. Faith is placing our trust in a reality beyond our knowing but still living and acting accordingly. Faith is trust, in knowing we don't fully understand, in trying to make sense of things, of being open to altering our understanding after fresh experience, and still acting in ways we believe are true to the demands of God's kingdom.

Certainty demands that we can define God; that we can know exactly what God is thinking and doing. Certainty says do 'this', and 'that' will definitely happen.

Certainty denies faith and it also flies in the face of reality. We are certain that the sun will rise and set, the tides will rise and fall, but there is much in our world that we are not certain about. But we can have faith, we can trust, we cannot be certain what tomorrow might bring but we can trust that God will be there with us.

Certainty shatters when reality hits, faith remains. Faith is like water, it flows around, over and through things. Certainty hits things straight on and either breaks or remains there stubbornly ignoring reality.

So the same for politics as for religion, certainty is an illusion, so look for where you can have faith, where you can place your trust, and take leaps of faith as you seek to live, share and encourage the way of Christ. **Amen**