

Voting – Getting involved in society

As a people who follow Jesus we have a decision to make in a few weeks time. We have a General Election taking place on May 7th. We have a democratic right to vote if we are 18 or over. This is both a privilege and a responsibility. A question is what do we do? do we vote? who do we vote for? Should we vote? Should we spoil our voting paper?

This morning I will look at the early followers of Jesus in Acts, and from the Old Testament, Daniel and his friends and also Jeremiah. All of whom lived out a radical faith in their culture, society and political environment. It want to encourage you to do the same as it is important that followers of Jesus engage in society/culture/politics as part of our living, radical faith.

This may well be easier said than done. It is worth addressing the type of society we live in and with the election why as someone who follows Jesus it is difficult to endorse and vote for a person and or a party. There are Christian politicians but they are maybe not in our area so we can't vote for them. Would we vote for them anyway? It is not clear that any political party reflects fully the values we find in the Bible or the policies that are based on - 'Loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves.'

Let us look to the Bible on these matters of faith, voting and society. When we read about the first followers of Jesus in Acts, they were living under Roman occupation. Roman rule was headed up by the Emperor, who was to be acknowledged as a God. This for a start was not something the early believers endorsed along with many other aspects of Roman idolatry, living and entertainment. 1st century followers of Jesus did not follow the society, trends or culture around them - but they were involved. The followers of Jesus led radical lives which started in Jerusalem and spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Acts 2 v 42 – 47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Our call, like the followers of Jesus we read about in Acts is to live out a radical faith in Jesus. It is important that followers of Jesus engage in society/culture/politics as part of our living out of a radical faith.

This way of living began to change the society around them. Despite all the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire a big change happened in AD 306. This change has a stronger influence on us today than we may think.

While the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (reigned 306–337) ruled, Christianity began to transition to the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. He was declared the Emperor when he was visiting York in AD306. An event that happened on our doorstep that led to a very changed world.

Wikipedia records it this way - Constantine's decision to cease the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was a turning point for Early Christianity, sometimes referred to as the Triumph of the Church, the Peace of the Church or the Constantinian shift. In 313, Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan decriminalizing Christian worship. The emperor became a great patron of the Church and set a precedent for the position of the Christian emperor within the Church and the notion of orthodoxy, Christendom, ecumenical councils and the state church of the Roman Empire declared by edict in 380.

That is how Wikipedia describes how the era of Christendom began. What this meant was Biblical values got recognition and the commandments of the Bible were reflected in the Law, in Universities, schools and as a basis for society. This also led to a lot of political, social and business power being closely related to being a Christian. As we know this is not and has not always been a good thing as Christianity was attracting people due to its social, political and cultural influence but were not always being attracted by Jesus or by the life of following Jesus. Despite this we see that many of our laws and foundation of society in the UK has its basis in the Bible, it is just sometimes we have to look a long way back to find it.

Having looked back on one of our major influences, what about now - what is happening to society and culture now?

In the present day we can see that there is a shift away from Christendom. We live in a Pluralistic society where there are lots of different beliefs but also a distinct watering down of the notion that belief is even required or needed. Having a faith can sometimes be viewed as weak and can be seen as an inability to really get on in the world. There is also the post modern viewpoint that there is no ultimate truth, so strong beliefs are mistrusted, discounted or at best treated as a private matter. There is no reinforcement of Following Jesus from the Governments, universities or cultural institutions and certainly not in schools - as I have found out by reading our boys school books.

We have a really good example of living out faith in God in some similar circumstances in the book of Daniel. Please turn with me, or switch on your device to Daniel chapter 1.

Daniel chapter 1 v 1-7

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure-house of his god.

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick

to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

The Babylonians were basically undertaking cultural conquest by cultural assimilation. Articles from Jerusalem temple were taken and put them in their own temple. In Leeds today the equivalent I see is where church buildings that are now bars and clubs - the article of worship is now beer. The best of young and educated were taken and brought to Babylon where they are fully absorbed in Babylonian culture and world view, then they are used to develop the Babylon empire. If anyone in Jerusalem wanted to be part of their own culture they basically had to join it in Babylonia.

Like in Babylonia for the exiles, for Daniel, for the early followers of Jesus in the Roman Empire, for us now there is a Tension. How do we live, how do we pass this onto our children - what do we say to them. How do we respond, do we fight back, do we accommodate, make compromises, create our own sub-culture?

Our call, like Daniel and the followers of Jesus we read about in Acts is to live out a radical faith in Jesus. It is important that followers of Jesus engage in society/culture/politics as part of our living, radical faith.

Daniel did this, firstly he refused to defile himself with the Royal food - that could have got him killed, but he put God first. Then he interprets dreams - he doesn't try and please the King and he always states that it is God at work, he then defies orders and prays to God instead of the King, this is when the lions and the den come into play. Daniel lived out a radical life in an exile society but put God at the centre and honoured Him.

It was not only Daniel who lived out a radical faith of following God in Babylonia, it was his friends as well. We read in Daniel 3 where the King makes a gold statue of himself and when the music is played everyone has to bow down to it. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not do this and were then sentenced to being thrown into the fiery furnace. This is their response to the King.

'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'

These three took a huge risk, but maybe they didn't see it that way? They were key civil servants in Babylon, they were connected and involved in society and they engaged in the public square. The way they engaged in the public square on that day was a blatant radical act of following God above all other things. I love the way they declare this as they are about to be thrown into the furnace and they proclaim God's glory.

'But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'

We can read on at how that step of faith did deliver these men from the furnace unscathed and they turned the King towards God.

It is really important that we engage in the Public square, in society, with people with authority and influence, in the workplace, in coffee shops, at the supermarket and live out our radical faith and declare God's love for people whenever we can.

We did this on a grand scale at the Doing the Stuff conference a few weeks ago and wow it made a difference to many lives, let's keep doing that - asking what miracle they would like Jesus to do in their life, pray for healing, bless people with a small gift, give out food, serve and bless the community. These are just some ideas and ways we can engage and it is important you use your ideas and creativity and interests to draw others towards Jesus and stand up and stand out where necessary.

Voting is one way we can engage with society and influence it positively, but I want to encourage us to look for ways to engage, and if we engage as followers of Jesus, demonstrating the Kingdom of God amazing things can happen as Gods Kingdom comes.

Our call, like Daniel and friends, and the followers of Jesus we read about in Acts is to live out a radical faith in Jesus. It is important that followers of Jesus engage in society/culture/politics as part of our living a radical faith.

To this end I want to conclude with an extract of a letter to the exiles in Babylon from Jeremiah which lays down the course of action and it comes with a challenge and a promise;

Jeremiah 29 4-7 and 11-13

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'

For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.'

Ben Newman

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