

Acts 7: 55 to end
1 Peter 2: 2-10
John 14: 1-14

It won't have escaped your notice, I suspect, that we are fast approaching a General Election.

And it may be that a small part of you has some sympathy with Brenda from Bristol.

Did you hear her?

'Not another one!' she said when told the election date by a TV journalist.

And then rather nicely: 'There's too much politics going on at the moment', which I liked, as if politics is something we can have more or less of, depending on our preference!

And into this maelstrom the Church of England has, of course, jumped with our Archbishops last week sending a pastoral letter to all Anglican parishes and chaplaincies on the subject of the election.

It is not easy being the Archbishop of Canterbury, who, because he called for 'stability' in the pastoral letter has been accused by the media of being a Tory!

'Have I Got News For You' got it right, I think, when they said: 'Archbishop of Canterbury denies move to the right, as bishops must move diagonally'!

What the Archbishops actually said in their letter is that in the context of a "frantic and sometimes fraught" election campaign, "our first obligation as Christians" is to pray.

Quite right! Prayer as our bedrock.

To pray for those standing for office and to continue to pray for those who are subsequently elected.

(And we will be doing exactly this at Bristol Cathedral on Monday June 5.)

Our second obligation as Christians, the Archbishops said, is to "set aside apathy and cynicism" and to participate, and to encourage others to participate.

So, with Brenda, and perhaps some of you, I stand corrected!

Clearly, the Archbishop's pastoral letter is about the Church seeking to do 'public theology', to speak into the public square, to show the relevance of the body of Christ to the issues of the day.

And this is important. It definitely is.

The difficulty with public theology is that – by definition – because it is public – there is a tendency to excise out the theology, i.e. how you reached your conclusions, in order to make it accessible to people of all faiths and none.

The difficulty then is that when one reads public theology – like the Archbishop’s pastoral letter – one can be left wondering whether this or that statement about some aspect of public policy really flows from the gospel (or whether we have just adopted it for some other reason).

Also, such documents, I think, can lend themselves to a certain blandness, particularly for a risk averse Church anxious about courting controversy.

So, we get statements in the pastoral letter like:

[What we need is] ‘Education for all’. Well, yes.

‘Solutions to our housing challenges’. Yes.

‘A just economy’. Yes indeed!

But I wonder: are we necessarily playing to our strengths?

The theologian, Miroslav Volf, in a powerful and ambitious book titled ‘Exclusion and Embrace’ born out of the suffering of the people of the former Yugoslavia, when it fell apart, notes that a lot of politics is about ‘social arrangements’ (i.e. how we live together)

And there are strikingly different takes on how we might do this.

But what Volf goes onto say is that may be the better question for the Church – where we would be most playing to our strengths – is not so much to join in with deliberations about social arrangements but rather to ask this:

‘What kind of selves do we need to be to live in harmony with others?’

That’s the key question for us, he says.

It’s not that social arrangements are unimportant – of course not.

But there is a prior question. And it is our question.

‘What kind of selves do we need to be to live in harmony with others?’

And continuing from this, how does one go about creating such selves?

How are people of character formed? How are they fashioned?

People that will act rightly instinctively – not just because someone is watching or because they are likely to get into trouble if they don’t.

Because if we can get this right, lots of other things – public policy things – will fall into place.

So, if we turn to our bible readings today, do they guide us in any way at all on this question?

‘What kind of selves do we need to be to live in harmony with others?’

All three of our readings today, I would suggest, are instructive.

But it is our reading from 1 Peter that I’d like to start with.

The author of 1 Peter is writing to an early Christian community, incorporating new converts, people who were previously pagan.

And what does he want them to know?

What does he want them to remember?

He says this, in verse 9: ‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; God’s own people’

And then again in verse 10: ‘Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people’

You are a people.

We are a people.

This is important.

As we approach the election, with all the anxiety it engenders, we mustn’t forget this.

But what is it to be a people?

To be a people is clearly to have something in common.

It is to be in relationship – with God and with each other.

Most important in terms of being a people is that we share a story.

The author of 1 Peter is acutely aware of this.

The writer of Acts is also well aware of this.

Stephen, in Acts, tells that story, prior to the passage that was read today, and – like Jesus – loses his life for it.

And what is the story, our story?

It is a story that stretches back to the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It tells of God's faithfulness – even through the desert years, the wilderness, even as God's people went awry (just like we do sometimes).

Moreover, it is a story that reaches fulfilment in Christ, God's son, who became flesh and lived among us.

And what does a people do?

As 1 Peter says, a people proclaims that story – the mighty acts of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light (verse 9)

Being a people is profoundly counter-cultural.

Much more so than we often realise.

It is not about a little bit more niceness here or a bit more niceness there.

Being a people with a story is far more counter-cultural, and threatening to the powerful.

As a people, we are bound to each other.

We are not talking the language of rights here – individual rights – my rights over yours.

This is profoundly damaging. It is not the way the bible thinks. It is the scourge of our day.

We are a people – a body – bound to each other.

If one member suffers we all suffer.

If one member is honoured we all rejoice together (1 Corinthians 12: 26).

As the people of God, this is what we bring distinctively to the election, to the issues of the day.

So often we think we don't know what it is to be a people – with a story.

We lack confidence.

Like Thomas and Philip in our gospel reading

'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'

Or Philip: 'Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.'

And how does Jesus respond?

Philip, Philip, it's right in front of you.

I have been with you all this time, Jesus says.

Living with you. Loving you. Sharing life with you – in all its intimacy, its heartache, its richness.

There's nothing else.

Don't look for rules or regulations.

This is it. This is why I have come.

If you have seen me, Jesus says, you've seen the Father.

'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there also' (Matthew 18: 20)

We know this. You and I know this.

There's nothing more.

So, as we approach the general election and the challenges of our time, let us not be fearful.

Let us not lack confidence.

As a people with a story – and a God who is faithful – let us trust.

Lest we forget, salvation comes not from earthly rulers, not from anything they promise – important though all this is.

Rather, salvation comes from Christ, the one who burst out of the tomb.

We know this. We know the way.

Let us be transformed by the one who calls us – the one that longs for us to be with Him – so that others might live and live abundantly.

Amen.