

Sermon notes for Epiphany IV

Be subject unto the higher powers (Epistle)

And of course we know the instruction of our Lord to “*render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's*”.

There is a wise caution against political sermons, for the priest has no special expertise in this area. But the priest must expound Scripture, and not least these passages.

Our business is with God; “*our citizenship is in heaven*” (this is the correct translation of Philippians 3.20). By comparison, all the rulers of this world, whether politicians or businessmen or leaders of pressure groups or terrorists, are trivial. Yes, they may make too much of themselves. Yes, they may do or plan unambiguous evil. But they cannot bring anyone to heaven or hell. All they can do is to make this world slightly more or less comfortable for a little time. Our first duty is to keep them in perspective. As the prophet puts it, they are “*like a drop in a bucket*” (Isaiah 40.15). So St. Paul calls us to obey - unless of course we are required to do something utterly grotesque, a clear breach of our duty to God.

Does democracy make a difference? We must be quite careful here. The New Testament never considers the problem, because none of its writers had practical experience of it. Quite possibly they did not even know that it had been tried and universally abandoned as a failure!

What the New Testament and the early church did know was that they could not hope to influence the State and indeed they might fall victim to it. We are now back in their situation - too few to make a difference and vulnerable, not indeed to martyrdom, but certainly to secular pressures.

We must not imagine that democracy is any better than the least bad option (All other systems are even worse, I think Churchill said). Nothing guarantees that a so-called “majority” (and nowadays a government can take office even though only a quarter of the electors voted for it) will be wise or even prudent. Democracy is a way of settling disputes for a time, which it indeed achieves - but not much more.

The early church took it for granted that Christians could take no part in government, though this was largely because government imposed the pagan religions and Caesar made himself out to be God. Nevertheless, they were sure that they must obey the government unless it required them to disobey God. When the Emperor decided to favour Christianity, the church eventually accepted that, as part of that charity which we certainly owe to our neighbours, some Christians might have to accept public office because otherwise everything would collapse.

We now live in a “secular society”, which operates as if God did not matter and in that sense puts itself in God's place. We still owe charity to our neighbours. Maybe some Christians are right still to believe that God wants them to exercise that charity through holding some position of power in the world; I do not know. Personally, I may have no power in the world as a priest, but I have to recognise that I have had a little power as an accountant to two charities! I do not know whether Christians ought to vote; if they do vote, they must do so after careful thought, and as part of charity to their neighbours, not for their own interest.

Obedience to the “*powers that be*” is then almost always a duty. They are “*ordained of God*” because it is through them that he offers the world a minimum of tranquility, a blessing which they may pervert.

Love of neighbour (charity) is always a duty, and it might even now lead us to vote or to accept positions of power in the world.

But love of God must come first.

The sermon is based on the Epistle for the Sunday