

Politics and Religion

December 10, 2006

(Advent 2 - Year C)

Luke 3: 1-6

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

People always say that there are two subjects that should be avoided at dinner parties:
Politics and religion.

Yet, Luke, in his Gospel, obviously did not get the memo that it is not polite to discuss politics and religion.

For, Luke begins his orderly account of the ministry of Jesus, by talking about *both* politics and religion, as he writes:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

A modern version of this Gospel account would be:

In the sixth year of the presidency of George Bush, when his brother Jeb was Governor of Florida and Rick Perry was Governor of Texas and during the episcopacy of the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori and the Right Reverend Don Wimberly,

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke does *not* mention all of these folks who are important in the world of politics and the world of religion in his day in order to give us an exact date for the start of the ministry of Jesus.

Luke *does* mention all of these folks who are important in the worlds of politics and religion in his day, to show the challenge and confrontation between the powers of this world and the power of the Holy Spirit.

For, the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, does not bury its head in the sand and ignore the world of politics and religion.

Instead, the Gospel of Jesus Christ uses the language of an impolite dinner party conversation.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ lives and grows, confronting the *reality* of politics and religion, in each and every generation.

I have heard folks say before:

“I want my church to be nice and quiet and serene.

I don’t like it when the Church gets all involved in politics.”

Well, too bad.

Because Luke begins his account of the ministry of Jesus Christ by framing his ministry in the context of the political and religious powers of his day.

Luke begins the ministry of Jesus Christ with the voice of John the Baptist:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

[For] every valley shall be filled,

And every mountain and hill shall be made low,

And the crooked shall be made straight,

And the rough ways made smooth.”

John the Baptist is not some nice and quiet and serene gentleman.

John the Baptist is not preparing the way for a Messiah and a Church that does not get involved in the mix of politics and religion.

John the Baptist is a crazy man, who will eventually protest and then confront King Herod, telling King Herod that it is wrong for the King to marry his own sister in-law.¹

For, my friends, I believe that the Church of Jesus Christ is the strongest and most faithful, when we stand up and against the political and religious powers of the day.

¹ Luke 3: 19-20, Mark 6: 17-18

The Church is the most faithful when we don't get in bed with the rulers of Rome or Judea or Galilee or Trachonitis or Abilene, or even with the religious rulers in Canterbury or New York City or Houston.

The Church is the most faithful when we stand alone in the Jordan wilderness, crying out and proclaiming justice and freedom and peace.

Yesterday morning, I learned that a friend and a colleague of mine, a priest who was in my class at seminary, was arrested on Friday, along with his Bishop.

My friend, Will, and his Bishop, Marc Andrus, were arrested in a protest over current events in the Middle East and Iraq.

Now, I will say that I don't agree with everything that Will stands for, nor do I agree with all of his opinions.

But, as I looked online at pictures of the peaceful protests that ended in Will's arrest,

I felt a deep sense of gratitude for knowing Will and a sense of gratitude that I am a part of a Church that engages the political and religious rulers of our day.

I saw pictures online of priests and a bishop in the Church, dressed in their full vestments, processing down a city street, with liquor stores and pawn shops and federal buildings in the background.

I saw pictures of the Church, stepping out boldly into the world, as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

Although we might not agree with the opinions of others, I am grateful for a Church that is willing to engage and challenge the world, rather than put its head in the sand.

And, if you don't like a Church like that
Well, too bad.

Because Luke begins his account of the ministry of Jesus Christ with a confrontation and challenge for the political and religious powers of his day.

Luke begins the ministry of Jesus Christ with the voice of John the Baptist:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Yet, in the eyes of the political and religious world, the ministry of John the Baptist was a colossal failure.

John played second fiddle and side kick to Jesus, the Christ.

John screamed out in the wilderness, begging people to change their self-centered lives.

John confronted the King and the King’s own pompous political power. And, for that, John ended up, literally, with his head on a platter.²

Last Friday night, our family was driving back from one of Scott’s basketball games, which was in Corsicana.

On the way back into Waco, I decided to drive all the way down Highway 84, starting at East Waco Drive, on the other side of town.

A Christian, I believe, cannot drive down East Waco Drive without getting as angry and as confrontational as John the Baptist:

Angry about the empty houses that have become crack houses,

Angry about the corner stores that sell lottery tickets to the desperate poor,

Angry about the inadequate schools,

Angry about the residual racism that still perpetuates a cycle of poverty.

And, it is our job, as Christians, to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

It is our job, as Christians, to work for a day when every valley of poverty is filled,

Every mountain and hill of racism is brought low,

And the crooked and rough ways of violence made smooth.

² Mark 6: 28, Matthew 14: 11

People always say that there are two subjects that should be avoided at
dinner parties:

Politics and religion.

And, those people are correct.

Politics and religion are *not* to be addressed in *polite* company.

Politics and religion are to be addressed in the Church.

But, I want to warn you.

You might end up with your head on a platter.

AMEN.

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