

Sermon Given by

Simon Scott

At the 9am Service on 14th March 2010

Matthew 5:13-16 - "Votewise!"

We are starting a new series today under the title Votewise, with a General Election probably less than two months away. The aim of the series isn't to argue about which party to vote for – but to urge us to vote wisely and to allow God's agenda to govern the way we vote. Many Christians, I think, would be inclined to suggest that to give this topic our attention is a mistake.

Certainly if you put the question to the nation as a whole there is a high level of disenchantment about politics and government. In the last general election only 61% of the electorate cast their vote. That is pretty low, but the all-time low was the election before that in 2001 at only 59%. Tony Blair actually received fewer votes to win than Neil Kinnock did when he lost in 1992. If you shift the focus from national politics to the European Parliament, the figure drops even further, with only 35% voting in last May's European elections. So in the population as a whole, we are not much enamoured of the political machinery of our nation, still less so after a year of revelations about our politicians' financial irregularities.

Amongst Christians there are a different set of concerns as to whether we should be involved politically. Of course it wasn't always so. You only have to travel back in time to the Victorian era and William Wilberforce campaigning throughout his lifetime for the abolition of slavery to see that Christians were very much involved in politics then.

Last century however there was a pendulum swing in reaction to a movement called the Social Gospel and Biblical Christians rightly voiced their suspicion of any idea that kingdom of God could be equated pure and simple to improved social justice. Many liberal theologians were arguing that: so if a factory or a nation was run along equitable, righteous guidelines, then that was a coming of the kingdom of God on earth, whether or not God's king, Jesus Christ, mentioned or honoured at all. Biblical Christians often tended to react against that idea and stepped back from any involvement with politics at all.

It's striking that Christians should be tempted to opt out of the democratic process, when you bear in mind that the case for democracy has often be made most strongly by Christians. Like the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who argued: 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'.

When the pendulum is swinging backwards and forwards it's always important for us to look for the Biblical perpendicular. So I want to start our little series with two principles, based on Jesus description of Christians as salt and light.

The two principles are these: Contrast and Contact.

Contrast first of all...

Jesus has just set out something of a manifesto for his followers. We call that manifesto the Beatitudes; and the blessings Jesus pronounces are in stark contrast to the 21st century definition of blessedness.

How might those blessings run today? 'Blessed are those with health, wealth and happiness – for they enjoy the good things of life. Blessed are the blasé, for they never shed a tear over anything; blessed are the pushy, for they get results, blessed are the power-hungry – for they really get on in life, blessed are the thick-skinned and the hard-headed, for they don't get hurt. Blessed are the trouble makers, they get their way in the end; blessed are the popular, for they are never short of friends'.

That is the way our world thinks, isn't it? According to Jesus, Christians are to be a marked contrast to that: Let me read vv 13-16 again: ***13" You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. 14" You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.***

The whole point of salt and light is that they are to be different from the element in which they find themselves.

Salt is distinctive; it preserves and stops rot. **Light** dispels darkness. Negatively therefore, Christians are to slow down the process of social decay, like salt preserving meat. Positively we are to push back the darkness by shining brightly and visibly for God.

But there is bit more going on here... Jesus is addressing his audience very specifically in these verses. '**You** people listening to me now are the salt of the earth. **You** folk on this mountain are the light of the world'.

It is very bold of him to speak this way. I know, the words are so familiar to us that they seem very ordinary. But to his disciples it must have been as if a bomb went off in their heads. Because Jesus was saying, in effect, that the little peasant crowd listening to him were now central to God's plans for the world.

That had been an honour that belonged to Israel: they had been called a Light to the Gentiles before. But not any more. 'You lot here are God's answer to the job which the whole country of Israel was supposed to do,' says Jesus to his listeners. 'You disciples of mine are from now on God's mouthpiece to the world'.

Do you remember that pivotal promise made to Abraham, that through him all the nations of the world were going to be blessed? The Jewish nation as a whole had failed to live up to that. They were no longer salty – so, implies Jesus, Israel is going to be chucked out – they were going to be quite literally trampled to dust under the boots of the Roman army, in no time at all. Why? Because they weren't a light to the Gentiles any more. 'That's now you lot', says Jesus.

What Jesus is saying is absolutely radical: God's counter-culture is no longer based in Jerusalem. Jesus is saying: 'It centres on me! And therefore it centres on you, as you listen

to me'. Do you see how this must have been like a bomb going off in the minds of Jesus' hearers? He takes the map of the whole spiritual landscape they're familiar with and tears it up before their very eyes. And what does he put in its place? Himself and his followers.

In other words, to be a follower of Jesus is a transforming event and it will bring about a kingdom which is in stark contrast to the world around us, challenging its morality, arresting its decay and illuminating its darkness.

It is very fashionable theologically to blur the distinction between the church and the world and to refer to all mankind as the 'people of God'. We mustn't do that. Christians are meant to be a stark contrast with the world around them.

So whenever people come to a genuine faith in Christ it transforms individuals for a start: I love the story a young boy in the Swansea suburb of Aberavon in the time of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who told his school teacher at school about the lunch his family had enjoyed one day: gravy, potatoes, meat, cabbage, even rice pudding. Then he explained it all: 'my father has been converted...' (and for the first time he could remember his father's wages had been spent on food not alcohol).

Or that story that Charles Spurgeon told about the domestic servant whom he was quizzing about her faith... He asked her how had Christ changed her: 'well, she explained, 'I sweep **under** the mats now'.

Christ changes individuals and a conversion like that is amongst the most political of acts – because in changing individuals, Christ changes society as a whole.

There was a revival in Wales in 1859 and before that the churches were withering away; a wave of spiritual apathy and practical infidelity had spread over Wales. But a year after the revival, the number of criminal cases before the Welsh courts had dropped from 1,809 to 1,228. The revival affected 100,000 people (a tenth of the population) most of them standing the test of time. That sort of movement of the Spirit affects the whole complexion of a nation.

Just in passing, I don't for that reason think it is all that helpful for Christians to look back longingly to Wilberforce and think that **his** methods should be **ours**. It was on the back of the huge revival under Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century that he could campaign for Christian standards to be recognised in Parliament.

If we want to campaign for Christian morality today in Parliament, we will ultimately be banging our heads against a brick wall unless the population of England is first of all converted and truly Christian... The great need is for Christians to live differently from the society around us. Existing Christians and new Christians.

But Contrast on its own is not enough. There must be contact with the world as well.

CONTACT

It's not an option for us to say that holiness means we are not to get involved with the world – or that we are to have nothing to do with the culture and life of the society we are in.

Have you heard of Simeon Stylites? He was one of the early Christian monks who used to live for years on end in the desert on top of pillars – supposedly to avoid defilement from being in contact with the world.

If you want a more obviously political example, you could argue that the pietistic movement of Germany was in part responsible for the rise of Hitler and for failing to challenge his Nazi philosophy. They were sincere Christians and they argued that it wasn't appropriate for godly Christians to get involved in the political debates of the 30s: politics was a dirty game and they were to keep themselves pure. Well maybe politics is a dirty game; but their failure to get involved made the game a lot dirtier.

No: The purpose of both salt and light is to interact with other things. The salt needs to be mixed in; as John Stott has put it: 'Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars'. The light cannot be under a bowl. It must shine.

We make a great mistake when we live as if there is a sacred secular divide. There is no such divide in the Bible. If we think that Sunday is the business of God but then we leave him firmly behind in church and he has no influence on our lives on Monday, that is quite wrong.

100% of life belongs to God, because he is the Creator of all life. Therefore every area of life is a sphere in which we must worship God. Bear that in mind when it comes to Election Day: Casting your vote is an act of worship. Of course it is! Politics itself is a perfectly appropriate sphere of worship.

As an illustration from the Bible, think of Daniel (which the Thursday morning groups have been studying). He was taken captive by a pagan king, who had destroyed Israel. When he was deported he was taught the language and literature of the Babylonians.

He didn't refuse to learn these things; instead he became an expert, the wisest in the kingdom. And yet: 'Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.'

That's the pattern then: involvement in society and distinctiveness: **Contrast + contact.**

I like the way T.C. Hammond put it. He was one of the well known names of the Christian world last century. He grew up in Dublin in the 1930s before emigrating to Australia where he had a significant part to play in the early history of Moore Theological College. He was person of awesome learning – and quite a character as well.

There was an occasion once during a General Election campaign, where someone posed the question: 'Mr Hammond – we are citizens of heaven, not of earth, so how can we vote in a general election?' 'Well, Madam,' replied Hammond, 'it's like this: if you can't vote as a citizen, why don't you vote as a lodger?'

We belong to another world, but we are still in this world in the meantime and therefore that tension - contact and contrast - must come into play.

So how will it express itself in the whole matter of politics? Let me make a number of applications as we draw to a close...

We should seek to exert a Christian influence in Parliament. Let's be willing to write letters expressing our point of view to our MPs. Let's also pray for Parliament: for salt and light in the first place amongst the staff. There is a parliamentary staff Christian fellowship which meets weekly in small groups for Bible Study and prayer and has regular speaker meetings. There is a Bible Study for Members of Parliament as well. And a National Prayer Breakfast twice a year. We should pray for the influence to be positive.

We ought to be **praying for some Christians to become MPs.** We will see next week that the work of government is not wrong, in fact it is God-ordained work. I wonder, if a clearly Christian candidate were standing in our seat, would we set aside our party loyalty if we have one and vote for them. That might not necessarily be what we conclude we should do, but the question should certainly be faced and thought through.

We should seek to exert a Christian influence though our own witness as well. We won't ultimately have a Christian government without a Christian society. So the question 'what must I do to improve the spiritual quality and integrity of my society and our government?' becomes an urgent one.

Part of the answer is my own personal holiness. We are to be thermostats not thermometers. In other words our own conduct is to have an effect on the spiritual temperature and the moral climate around us. Not the other way around. We are not simply to relay the temperature around us to others, to cool down morally and spiritually, just because the society is doing so. We certainly mustn't allow ourselves to think that our Christian lifestyle is simply a private matter. How I conduct myself in my family, in the workplace and so on is crucial, particularly if I have any position of influence over others.

I love that testimony about one of our church members where someone who wasn't a Christian commented to him that he ran his company as if it was church. That wasn't a complaint about him forcing his Christian views on everyone whether they liked it or not. It was a comment that each person was valued and taken seriously.

Part of the answer is our evangelism. I wonder if that is how we are praying in the aftermath of Passion for life. We've already noted that arguably the most political act which can happen is when someone becomes a follower of Christ.

It's often said: the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. There won't be wars or riots or courts or police in heaven. So much of the work of government is connected with human sinfulness in one form or another. And to that sinfulness, the gospel is the great answer, because whenever people respond to the gospel sin is forgiven and lives are changed as Jesus Christ takes up residence in people's hearts.

And how we conduct ourselves corporately as a church fellowship is crucial as well. You think how much politics focuses today on the various conflicts which mar society – the battle of the sexes, racial conflict, the class war. In the church we should see a kingdom where things are very different – a kingdom where love replaces conflict. And as such the church's life should be a powerful witness to the world around.

Let me close by telling you about a hugely popular American tv show called Extreme Makeover. It's wonderfully sentimental: a severely disadvantaged family living in terrible conditions will have a marvellous new home built for them by the ABC television network.

They get whisked off to a theme park for a week's holiday and the builders destroy the old hovel and build a modern mansion in its place. Family get brought back to tear-jerking scenes to move in to their new home. One of the best things is the way lots of local tradesmen are involved...

I wonder if we are aware as we should be that God is involved in the Extreme Makeover of the Universe. He is committed to bringing about a new Creation – the first instalment of that happened when he raised Jesus to life again. And he chooses to involve Christians in his makeover of the universe in just the same way the local tradesmen are used in the tv show:

¹³"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. ¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)