

The Christian Faith and the Life of Politics...

Our own chorister Douglas Murray has recently published a very constructive book about politics, political relationships and values. I commend it to you for your New Year reading. I commend also as a necessity for anyone wanting to understand the political responsibility of a Christian, a book written nearly 1600 years ago. It's by St Augustine and it's called *City of God*. This is what St Augustine says about governments:

Take away justice, then, and what are governments but great confederacies of robbers? After all, what are confederacies of robbers unless they are small-scale governments? The gang itself consists of men, it is directed by the authority of the chief, it is bound together by a pact of mutual support and they divide the loot. The reply that a captured pirate made to Alexander the Great is interesting. For when Alexander asked the pirate how he could justify making the sea a dangerous place, he answered, with defiant outspokenness, 'In exactly the way that you justify doing the same to the whole world. But because I do it with a single paltry ship, I am called a robber; while you do it with a large navy, and are called an emperor'

St Augustine said that Christians are forced to live in two cities: the city of this world and the city of God. You cannot put on a mask of holy detachment and pretend to make your life only in the city of God – because you are flesh and blood and you need the material things of this world in order to survive. And if men will not control the world's goods according to justice, then the goods will be left to the pirates.

So all Christians are bound to the world of practical politics. And even if you say *A plague on all their houses* and refuse to vote for any of them, your not-voting is a factor in the political balance. You can say *I don't vote – it only encourages them* if you like. The point is that not-voting is also a political act.

You might conjecture for a minute that just to have the vote is the beginning of political liberty. There are many countries where there is no such luxury. So how should a Christian cast his vote? Malcolm Muggeridge used to say that *with the socialists we get a few moral goodies and with the conservatives we get a few economic goodies*. St Augustine would tell him not to be so stupid: for since we inhabit this world of flesh and blood, of houses, farms and lands, all our morality is tied up in the things of this world.

So you can't talk about morality without talking about money. Christians need to be reminded of this fact – because there is a mad, recurrent, puritanical heresy which says we can live the life of the spirit without the life of the flesh. Try it and see what happens. You will end up – as my newsagent grandfather used to say – *Like Scratty's donkey – which just got used to living without eating when it died*

But we know what old Mugg was getting at. He was restating the cliché that, whatever its faults, socialism holds before us an ideal of equality. We feel warm about this, because we like fair do's. Listen outside any schoolroom and you will hear that most regular and savage complaint of the children, *It's not fair, Miss!*

Critics of socialism say that this equality business is precisely where socialism goes wrong: that the attempt to impose equality always results in the loss of freedom. Economic critics of socialism go so far as to say that this attempt to even things up results in things becoming a lot more uneven. Well, we've all read *The Servile State* and *The Roads to Serfdom* - haven't we?

Some have even read Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. Though I remember what Harold Wilson replied to some young socialist firebrand who thought the 1966 Labour Government had sold out to the market. *What does Marx say on this, Prime Minister?* And Wily old Harold said, *Never read it. Not past page two anyhow and that notorious footnote there. A lot fall at that footnote you know!*

There is a theological argument against strict socialism and it is that socialists cannot bring about the equality they desire – because the world is not an ideal place but an actual place. It is not a world of pure theory but of unpleasant facts. And that human beings who are imperfect creatures cannot bring about the perfect society. This is what St Augustine said in *City of God*

So what do the conservative politicians say? (You understand of course that I am not necessarily talking about that nice Mr Cameron who has his own ideas). Conservatives say that if you work with the grain of human nature and not against it, people will end up better off. And what do the critics of conservatism say to this? They say it doesn't work. They say it promotes obscene riches for a few and appalling poverty for the many. As Galbraith said in 1958, *Private affluence and public squalor*

So where does St Augustine come into all this? Where does Christianity come in? The Christian Faith says that all attempts at the earthly paradise must fail. All our politics are imperfect, because we are imperfect. This is true for the individual and it is therefore true for society

And this is where we might venture a few words of comment to conservative politicians. For while the ideological socialist might *pride himself* on his atheism, there is a great deal of practical atheism among conservatives – only it masquerades itself as *respectability*. Conservatives do not usually think of themselves as having Original Sin. They think pretty well of themselves on the whole. They don't really think of themselves as sinners in need of God's forgiveness. They're quite proud of how *decent* they are.

I've lost count of the number of times conservative friends have confided in me: *The Christian faith isn't actually true, you know – all that miraculous stuff - but it's a good basis for morality*. And I've lost count of the number of times I've had to reply: *But something that's not true isn't a good basis for anything. And without all that miraculous stuff there is no Christian faith at all*

For the Christian, politics is not the ultimate, is not what's most basic. Politics needs faith. Men and women need Christ the Redeemer. There is such a thing as society. There is such a thing as community. You have heard me quote T.S. Eliot on this before:

There is no life not lived in community. But he adds: And no community not lived in praise of God. And our lives must first of all actually be lives with God.

This is forgotten, even in the City. Oh they love to think of themselves as traditional. You come here on Friday to the City Service. They love to sing *I Vow to Thee My Country* and *Jerusalem*. They love the prayers for the Queen's Majesty and everything else that goes along with Speech Night and rugger and striped trousers and spotted dick and the School Song. They believe in making money and then, encouraged by theologically illiterate and politically naïve clergymen, going off to salve their consciences with some extravagant gesture in the East End.

But the real duty of Christians in the political world is not such confused gestures. Our whole meaning and purpose is to acknowledge God as the basis of our lives and thus of our institutions. Our institutions – the church, the law, the university, the monarchy – are beyond party politics. We have institutions so we do not die of politics. If we do not acknowledge God as the ground of all we are, then whether we think of ourselves as socialists or conservatives – or worst of all *respectable* – we shall be like chaff in the wind. We need Prayer and Scripture and the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. With these things we purify and sanctify our institutions – our lives together.

*O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
And dark the sun and dark the moon, and the Almanch de Gotha -
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors.*

Here we have no abiding city. Think of that as you walk down Cornhill and towards the Bank of England. Ye see these great buildings? Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left standing one stone upon another before the great and notable Day of the Lord.