

The Christian Faith and Public Life

Sermon Notes and Background Notes

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Texts:

Matthew 6: 9-13

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.* Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Luke 4:17-20

¹⁷ And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; ¹⁹ To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” ²⁰ Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. ²¹ And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Sermon Notes

Introduction

Jesus commands us to love our neighbours. But what does this commandment mean for our many and varied roles – whether as parents, grandparents, employees, employers, students, investors, citizens, public servants, retirees or elected officials?

Moreover, if the commandment is universally applicable, if it is relevant to all people and every sphere of life, both private and public, then what does it mean for the policies of governments and the big issues of today – whether economic, social, cultural, or environmental? What, for instance, are the implications of neighbour love for our country's refugee quota or trade policies, or for the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, or for such matters as our nation's greenhouse gas emissions, health and safety legislation, spatial planning or the war between Russia and Ukraine? And what might neighbour love mean for race relations, co-governance, or protecting the interests of future generations?

Likewise, Jesus taught his disciples to pray: 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven'. But what is the Kingdom of God? And what does doing the will of God require of us – not just privately, but publicly, and not just individually, but collectively? Many other questions also arise. For instance, how relevant are concepts like the 'Kingdom of God' in a modern, secular democracy like New Zealand? And to what extent is it justifiable for individual Christians or the wider church to seek the adoption of public policies that reflect Christian values? Is not the coercive imposition of religiously-based policies by the state contrary to liberal-democratic principles? Surely Christians should not be championing theocracy?

Today I want to reflect briefly on the Christian faith and public life – in other words, the task of thinking Christianly about the world of

politics, government, public policy and international relations. Such thinking is variously referred to as ‘public theology’, ‘Christian public ethics’, ‘Christian social ethics’ and the ‘welfare of the city’. It covers a large terrain and many fascinating issues. Realistically I can only highlight a few key points in the time available.

Let me start with four basic propositions.

First, the Gospel of Christ – the good news of God’s redemptive purposes for humanity and the cosmos – is relevant to every dimension of life, private and public, personal and communal, our inner life and our relationships with others. God is concerned with all spheres of life, not just some little bits. This means that the vision, values, and virtues of the Gospel are universally relevant and applicable – in our homes, businesses, schools, hospitals, retirement villages and cyberspace; and in every policy domain: education, health, criminal justice, defence, transport and communications, the environment, primary industry, trade, immigration, industrial relations, infrastructure investment, scientific research and the regulation of business.

Second, it follows that our Christian witness must include thoughtful engagement with the local, national, and global issues of the day. We are called to bring God’s love, justice, and truth to every corner of the public square and every transaction in the marketplace – to all areas of decision-making, large and small. The truths of the Gospel are public truths and have public consequences. They are not merely privately engaging; they are also publicly relevant.

Third, unfortunately, the voice of the church and individual Christians, whether in the public square or the world of business, has become increasingly muted, not least here in Aotearoa New Zealand. There are many reasons for this (see attached notes). Distilling and applying the values of the Gospel to public life is challenging. Many policy problems are technically complex and morally testing. Rapid economic, social, and technological change confronts us with

uncharted waters, deep uncertainty, and unexpected risks. Scarcity, likewise, is a constant companion, as is the grim reality of evil, both moral and natural. For such reasons, there are typically no perfectly good policy options. Indeed, often all the choices that are available appear to be morally questionable, with substantial costs or significant harm whatever we do. Compromise is thus inevitable. These are some of the hard realities which societies and their governments must face.

Fourth, despite this, we can approach the task of public theology with confidence. There is no reason to be fearful, anxious, or reticent. We have the Scriptures and a rich tradition of Christian thinking on which to draw. Amongst this is a large reservoir of Catholic social teaching and a wealth of scholarship on policy issues by Protestant and Orthodox theologians and ethicists, including many within the Reformed tradition such as Karl Barth and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

Above all, we have the assurance that God is at work through the Holy Spirit – revealing new truth, bringing new life, and equipping and inspiring all those open to the Spirit’s call. Hence, while the problems confronting humanity are serious and daunting, we have a firm basis for hope and a clear calling to contribute thoughtfully as Christians to the public life of this city, this nation, and the world.

Christian foundations for public life

As Christians, our starting point for reflecting on public life and public policy must be Jesus Christ. And if we study the life of Jesus, it is clear that the good news of the Kingdom of God was central to his teaching. In Luke’s account, Jesus commenced his public ministry by quoting from the prophet Isaiah and declaring that the Kingdom is being fulfilled:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery

of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; ¹⁹ To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” ²⁰ Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. ²¹ And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Plainly, Jesus saw Himself as pivotal to the realization of God’s Kingdom and associated his own ministry with its coming. He perceived that God’s great and long-awaited intervention in history had finally arrived, and that he was its agent. A new age was dawning, one in which the alienation, distortion, and rebellion that characterize the world would be overcome, and God’s reign of peace and justice would be fully realized. As Christians, we believe that God’s Incarnation in Christ marks the dawning of this new era.

Yet while God’s Kingdom is close at hand, it is certainly not yet complete. It has been birthed or inaugurated, but not yet consummated or perfected. This is clear from the evil, pain, suffering, and misery we witness constantly in our midst. It is also consistent with Jesus’ injunction for his disciples to pray: *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven*. There would be no need for such a prayer if God’s reign was already fully established. Today, therefore, we live in the so-called in-between time, the age of the ‘already, but not yet’ – what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called ‘the penultimate age’.

At the same time, Jesus wants us to live and work for the full realization of God’s Kingdom. Hence, his injunction for us to pray: *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven*. There would be no need to pray these words if they were not important or relevant.

But while we are called to pray and work earnestly for the Kingdom, this goal cannot be accomplished solely through human actions. We cannot achieve Heaven on Earth simply via better policies or leading

better lives. Ultimately, the full realization of the Kingdom must await God's sovereign action in the future.

In the meantime, the Lord's Prayer underscores God's great desire, namely that His will be done on Earth as in Heaven. It also reminds us that we are privileged to serve as co-workers with Christ in extending God's reign.

But what does this mean in practice? What, for instance, are the characteristics and values of the Kingdom?

Plainly, there are many. Let me mention four briefly, drawing on the work of Christian ethicists like Glen Stassen and David Gushee:

1. first, deliverance from oppression, persecution and domination or rescue from sin, bondage or imprisonment;
2. second, peace – and not merely the end of war or the absence of violence, but also the end of enmity and the establishment of harmony and good will;
3. third, justice or righteousness – and not just the idea of fairness, but also the end of subjugation, victimization, marginalization, humiliation or abuse; and
4. fourth, healing – in all its dimensions, physical, emotional and psychological, and the end of brokenness and mourning.

In short, amongst the signs of God's will being done on Earth are deliverance, peace, justice, and healing. Such signs, of course, underscore God's deep compassion for the poor, the vulnerable, and the afflicted, and point to the centrality of forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation. Equally, they affirm the sanctity and dignity of every human life and the importance of seeking peace and minimizing violence.

Implications for public life

What, then, does working for the Kingdom mean for our role as Christians in the world and for the public witness of the church? Here are six suggestions.

First, as noted, God's desire is for justice, reconciliation, and peace ... for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2). These goals are good. They are relevant for all societies and every person, throughout time and space. We have no reason to be ashamed of, or defensive about, our Christian witness in advocating such values. They manifest what is truly good for humanity and the cosmos. And they reflect what human beings most deeply desire.

Moreover, the ethics of the Kingdom are as applicable to a nation's public life – that is, to the decisions of our cabinets, parliaments, and local councils – as they are to our private lives. As Christians we should embody these values in our personal lives and the corporate life of the church, and be advocates for them in the public life of the nation.

Second, our public witness should reflect the broad and comprehensive nature of God's concerns. It must not focus solely on a narrow range of ethical issues. Equally, it must be distinctively Christian, offering something that is genuinely Gospel and thus life-giving and life-enhancing. To quote David Gushee (2014, p.96):

The church's public moral witness ... should focus on a vision of the human good, of "shalom" at every level of human experience in God's good creation. We should yearn to see "love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss (Ps 85:10). We should seek to honor, protect, and advance abundant life (John 10:10), for all, at every stage, and in every condition.

Third, our contributions to public life must be meaningful, intelligible, and accessible. We need to tailor our language to the audience. Significantly, Jesus, who was immersed in a Jewish context, talked

repeatedly about the Kingdom of God, while St Paul, whose ministry was to the Gentiles, did not. There is a lesson in this. If we engage publicly in too much ‘God-talk’ we may quickly lose our audience, especially in a highly secular society like Aotearoa New Zealand. Against this, if we fail to use the language of our faith and rely exclusively on a ‘common currency approach’ or ‘thin’ conceptions of the good life, we risk losing the distinctiveness, depth, quality, and value of our contribution (see Garner, 2015, p.27). Hence, we must seek a careful balance.

Fourth, we should take the world’s agenda seriously but not be bound by it. Indeed, wherever appropriate we should seek to transform the world’s agenda and show leadership by shining the light of truth into the dark and hidden places, those which are overlooked or disregarded by the prevailing mind-sets and societal biases. In particular, we should speak for those who lack a voice – like children and refugees – and highlight those issues which are being ignored.

Fifth, our contributions to public life must have integrity and be offered in a manner consistent with Christ’s example and teaching. While they need strong theological foundations, they must also be informed by logic and the best available scientific evidence. Likewise, if the church urges governments or individuals to do certain kinds of things, such as reduce their carbon footprints, then it must also walk the talk. We must live out our message. Otherwise, we will lack credibility.

Finally, in contributing to public life the institutional church must be ready to partner with all people of goodwill as it pursues the common good. But in so doing it must be fiercely independent politically. Hence, Christian denominations and individual churches should not become politically aligned. This does not, of course, bar Christians from joining political parties or pressure groups. On the contrary, they should be encouraged to do so. But the church as an institution must remain non-partisan and thus free to speak truth to power from a stance of genuine

political impartiality. Remember, our primary loyalty must always be to Jesus Christ, not to a state or a political party, since Christ is Lord.

Some people, of course, will argue that the approach I have outlined is too hard or that the church is too divided to take a stand on the major issues of the day. True, there are many divisions, but there is also much about which most Christians agree. Moreover, we must continue to grapple with our areas of disagreement and seek the mind of Christ. After all, our Lord prayed earnestly for the unity of believers (John 17: 23): ‘so that the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me’.

Conclusion

To conclude, God’s reign is founded upon love and marked by deliverance, justice, healing, reconciliation, and peace. Such values are universally applicable and relevant to every sphere of life, not least the public life of cities and nations. Jesus calls us to pray for God’s reign to come, for God’s will to be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. He also calls us to serve as co-workers in this great endeavour.

Let us support each other in this calling, seeking always the mind of Christ and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit – that we may truly be salt and light in the world and do the will of God.

As the prophet Jeremiah 29:7 urges, we are to ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city’, or in the words of the prophet Micah 6:8: ‘He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’.

Some background notes on Christianity and public life in New Zealand

The nature of the problem

Let me start with three propositions. First, the Christian community in Aotearoa appears to have lost its public voice. It is increasingly silent in the public square – whether these are public forums like Parliament, or the print media, social media, or radio and television. Second, this relative silence is inconsistent with our basic Christian theology and our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ and witnesses to the redeeming love of God. After all, the God revealed through the Scriptures, and disclosed most vividly and powerfully in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, cares about the whole of life, public and private, communal and individual, material and non-material, visible and invisible – indeed all aspects of the created order, no matter how great or small. As Christians we are called to reflect God’s love, compassion, righteousness and care for the whole cosmos in how we live, both individually and corporately, both publicly and privately. Hence, third, Christians have a responsibility to re-enter the public square and bring to our public life, both locally and globally, the Gospel of truth and grace, in all its wonder, richness and liberating power.

The loss of a public voice

With a few notable exceptions, it is increasingly rare for church leaders and representatives of the various Christian denominations to speak publicly on important policy issues – whether local, national or international – or to engage in public debate on major issues of concern to citizens (see Bradstock, 2015). As an institution, the Christian church is largely silent; its leaders appear reticent, reserved and often defensive; they are mostly spectators and bystanders rather than active participants in the drama of public life. How often, in recent years, for instance has the institutional church been at the forefront of, or significantly shaped, the national debate on a public issue of major importance? It is hard to think of many examples.

Church leaders, ministers, pastors and priests are not alone in their relative quiescence; the voice of the laity is equally muted. Of course, there are many devout Christians contributing daily to the public life of this nation in a wide range of roles and vocations, whether as politicians, public servants, business people, trade unionists, representatives of civil society organizations, researchers, educationalists, health care professionals, and so on. But if one reads the newspapers or listens to radio or TV channels, few informed and distinctively Christian perspectives are being offered on the major political, social, economic or environmental issues of the day. The language of God and theology – whether moral theology, pastoral theology, public theology or political theology – is largely absent. Public issues are rarely evaluated using distinctively theological categories, concepts and principles. It is as if God has been removed from the public square. It is as if the Christian mind has undergone by-pass surgery. In short, while the Christian faith may remain privately engaging at least for some, publicly it is largely irrelevant.

I realize of course that there are exceptions. Some policy issues, like abortion and sexual relationships, continue to generate a Christian voice in the public square. Some churches, notably the Salvation Army, speak regularly on a range of social issues, especially housing and poverty. And there remain a number of individual Christians who contribute thoughtfully to public debate, for instance, via social media, submissions on draft legislation, letters to the editor, newspaper articles and books. People like Richard Randerson, Major Campbell Roberts, Peter Lineham and Chris Marshall spring readily to mind, as do the leaders of various Christian organizations like World Vision.

Globally, the picture is more varied. Christian leaders across the denominations continue to speak publicly and boldly on a range of issues. One thinks, for example, of Pope Francis, Rowan Williams, David Gushee, and many others. In some countries, of course, freedom of speech and expression is constrained, thus limiting the opportunity for more public expressions of the Christian faith. Alternatively, the Christian voice has been largely co-opted by the governing regime or has become subservient to the interests of a particular political party or social movement. Fortunately, here in New Zealand, neither of these limitations or perversities applies.

The reasons for the loss of a public voice

Given this situation, why has the church in New Zealand, in its many and varied institutional forms, largely vacated the public square, and why are individual Christians relatively quiescent – at least in terms of presenting a distinctive Christian contribution to public issues?

No doubt there are many reasons. Briefly, and in no order of importance, they include the following:

- a loss of confidence in the truth and relevance of the Gospel and the major doctrines of the Christian faith;
- significant theological and ethical divisions, thus making it hard for Christian denominations to agree on what the church or its representatives should say publicly;
- a tendency for some Christians to make sharp distinctions between evangelism and social concern, between the secular and sacred, and between the public and private spheres of life, and to favour a narrow conception of mission which is focused solely on individual salvation and ignores issues of social justice, environmental sustainability or institutional reform;
- a tendency, in the face of declining congregations and more limited resources, for the church to turn inwards rather than outwards, to focus on ‘in-reach’, not ‘out-reach’;
- a failure to harness the wealth of talent, insight, expertise and capability within the Christian community; and
- a related tendency for church ministers, pastors and priests to focus on equipping the laity to serve within the church rather than in the world

Richard Randerson’s recent book, *Slipping its Moorings*, rightly laments the inward-looking nature of much of the modern church. He speaks of an ‘ecclesiastical inversion’ (p.223), where lay training focuses ‘almost exclusively on teaching lay people how to help run the local church, lead worship services, or care pastorally for the aged or sick’. In other words, ‘the laity are trained to help the clergy run the church, instead of the clergy working with the laity to change the world’ (p.223) or equipping the laity for their ministry in the world or the workplace, be it an office, shop, factory, school or hospital. Hence, the focus is on a narrow ecclesiology rather than a broader theology of everyday life.

Just think how much time church meetings, committees and vestries spend on issues of bricks and mortar, church buildings and budgets, relative to the global, national and local issues of the day or the worlds of work, business, politics and international relations.

Likewise, I am reminded that when I helped organize a conference here in Wellington a few years ago on Christianity and the environment, some local churches refused to advertise the event because the ecological crisis, they said, were not relevant to the Gospel.

The challenges of speaking into the public square

Aside from the problems of poor theology and an inward focus, it has also become harder over recent decades for the representatives of Christian organizations to contribute to public life. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, as an institution, the church no longer commands as much respect, status or authority in society as was once the case. Repeated scandals within the church, not least the widespread sexual abuse of children, have taken a heavy toll. Moreover, we live in a diverse, pluralistic and largely secular age, with many competing creeds and philosophies, where many reject any notion of objective truth or universal values, and where only a minority now accept Christian theology as authoritative, trustworthy and containing public truth. In such a world, the Christian church can claim no more right to be heard than anyone else. To be sure, it supports many good causes and undertakes many fine works of charity, care and compassion, but such activities are not unique to the Christian community.

Second, as pointed out by Andrew Bradstock, the former Professor of Public Theology at the University of Otago: ‘significant sections of the mass media accord very low priority to serious discussion of current issues’ and ‘voices offering a “faith” perspective, or seeking even to draw on the language of conviction or moral value, are at worst unwelcome and at best misunderstood’ (Bradstock, 2015). Thus, when church spokespersons endeavour to express their views publicly, their press releases rarely capture the headlines – unless perhaps they relate to a wayward priest or deviant pastor. And to the extent they are reported, many people no doubt regard their views as quaint, antiquated, peculiar, unintelligible or irrelevant. In short, the challenge for the church in New Zealand, as for any marginalized community, is not merely a reluctance to speak, but also finding a receptive audience.

Third, there is no longer a relatively unified or common public square. The internet and social media has transformed communications and human interaction. We live in an age of diverse, disconnected public spaces with multiple media and vast array of blogs, commentaries, networks and modes of participation. Expressing views and offering advice in such a world is very easy, but being heard and taken seriously is much more difficult.

Finally, we confront a world with many new, emerging and complex issues, generated by rapidly advancing technologies and profound societal changes. Speaking into such a world with integrity and wisdom requires expertise, care and reflection. This takes time, effort and resources – all of which are in short supply.

What are some of the solutions?

There are no simple solutions to this lamentable and challenging state of affairs. But amongst other things we need the following:

1. new systems and structures within and between the various Christian denominations to enable more effective contributions to public life;
2. more vigorous engagement by church leaders with contemporary public issues, including articles in major media outlets and via social media;
3. a greater willingness by those in the preaching and teaching ministries within individual congregations to address contemporary public issues in sermons and in other forums – so as to equip the saints for their service in the world;
4. encouraging Christians who have relevant professional, policy or ethical expertise to contribute to public discussions on specific issues and to lead forums within their local congregations; and

5. greater efforts to draw upon, and bring together, the capabilities and expertise of lay people across the various denominations, perhaps via dedicated commissions on specific public issues – so as to produce thoughtful Christian perspectives.

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