

Hi Vicki –

As promised, here is a sketch of my homily last Sunday (1 December, 2019) at St Leo's. You can pass this on to whomever might be interested.

- Jim Fredericks

In praise of politics: a reflection on Is. 2:1-5

This morning, I would like to reflect on the first reading, but, by way of introduction, let me tell you a little about my friend, Loh Gung-wei. She was born into a prominent family in Hong Kong, back in the days when it was a British colony. After finishing her education in England, she returned to Hong Kong and eventually worked with Chris Patten, the last Crown-Governor of the colony before its reversion to the People's Republic of China. Loh Gung-wei (you can call her Christine) was part of a team of leaders working with Patten in establishing a parliament for Hong Kong. She went on to become the minister for the environment for Hong Kong. My friend is quite distinguished and committed to the political life and common good of her city.

As you might imagine, Loh Gung-wei is upset about the last several months of civil unrest in Hong Kong. In a recent email, she wrote me that, "Here in HK, it seems that we are giving up on politics." She didn't leave it at that. She went on to say that we are beginning to give up on politics here in the USA as well.

Today, on this, the first Sunday of Advent, I would like to speak in praise of politics, our responsibility, as Christians, to support politics, and indeed, to engage in politics with the passion and humility appropriate to a genuine faith in God.

Why should we embrace the give-and-take of politics? An obvious answer to this question is that the alternative to politics is dreadful to think of. Not just the violence scarring the streets of Hong Kong come to mind. The suffering of the people of Venezuela is an example what happens when we lose faith in politics. Syria offers an example of what eventually happens after a society gives up on politics. But the dreadful alternatives to politics hardly account for our responsibility as Christians to embrace politics, with its lengthy processes, its compromises and its messiness. Christians cannot abandon politics for an important reason: God has not abandoned politics.

Allow me to explain what I mean by offering some ideas about what we, as Roman Catholics, have to offer to the United States at this time in its history. All of what follows comes out of the wealth of our Social Teachings and our spiritual tradition. But you certainly don't have to be a Catholic to embrace these teachings.

First, each of us needs to recognize that the starting point for addressing political problems always lies within us. The first problem to be addressed is the problem that I pose to myself as a sinful human being and that I pose to my fellow human beings. In this regard, let me focus on the cynicism that comes to us so easily these days. Cynicism about social difficulties is not acceptable. Just beneath the surface of our breezy, cosmopolitan cynicism is a covert self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is always self-serving. But we have not been placed on this earth to serve ourselves. We are to be men and women for others, as St Ignatius taught. As a practical exercise for persons with political responsibilities, I suggest that we make a regular habit of asking God to forgive us our sins. Try doing this. Spend some time when you are alone and reflect seriously on your life. I think you will come to agree that the first problem to be tackled in addressing our political problems lies within us. (By the way, in regard to asking God to forgive us our sins, let me remind you that we have a sacrament for just this very part of our spiritual lives – the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Let me go out on a little limb today and say to you that the under-use of this sacrament is directly related to the dismal state of our politics.)

Second, do not be afraid to speak what you believe to be the truth. Speak the truth even when it is not popular. But when you speak the truth, speak it quietly and patiently and only after you have first listened closely. There *should* be no truth-speaking without first listening. In fact, I think we must recognize that there *can be no truth-speaking* unless first there is a great deal of listening.

Third, never think that you are alone. This is a great illusion and the work of the Tempter. We live in a world of bridge builders, even though they don't always look like us or speak our language or even vote like us. Over the years, I have quoted Mother Theresa of Kolkata, now a saint, to you many times. She liked to say "We have been given to one another." Listen to this saint. She is leading us to the very heart of the Gospel. Or think of Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer. He used to say, "Connect! Always connect!" This goes to the heart of the Gospel as well. The ultimate benefit of our pursuit of politics is not mutual agreement, but solidarity.

Fourth, pray a lot. But do not pray for success. Instead, pray for faithfulness. In our political life, as in our private lives, we do not need to succeed in order for God's Kingdom to come. Only God needs to succeed in his Providential plan. Our true delight is not to succeed in our political plans, but to bear witness to the mysterious working of God in the world and nothing more.

This fourth piece of advice leads me to the first reading for today's mass.

The reading is from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. This man, one of the greatest of the Hebrew Prophets, lived eight centuries before Christ preached to the people of Israel. He lived at a time in which the Kingdom of Israel was threatened by the rise of the Assyrian Empire. In

Isaiah's time, the Jewish people underwent a crisis of their political institutions – irresponsible and corrupt monarchs, the warping of political institutions by the concentration of wealth into the hands of fewer and fewer people, and the breakdown of political discourse. Sound familiar? But Isaiah, as we can see in the first reading today, focuses on an overriding truth: the Prophet has a deep and abiding sense that God will not abandon His people or forsake His promises to them. More to the point, Isaiah proclaims that God has not abandoned history. He remains involved in the affairs of this world. God, in other words, can be found in our politics. God has not given up on politics. In fact, God lies within our politics, waiting to be encountered.

In his beautiful poetry, the Prophet assures us,

He shall judge between the nations,
and impose terms on many peoples.

The God proclaimed by the Prophet Isaiah has political convictions about what is right and what is wrong in regard to the politics of nations. And of course, we will learn that God's passion for politics has political implications for us all:

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
one nation shall not raise the sword against another,
nor shall they train for war again.

I hasten to say that we should not interpret any of these words of the Prophet to mean that God is on our side. Quite the contrary, the affirmation that God cares about politics places on us a great burden. We must align our politics with what God is bringing about in this world. This is no easy task for the proud and self-righteous. The scriptures attest, again and again, that God favors the humble and marginalized in this world. And the political implications of this revealed truth are enormous.

Our politics should begin by looking inward at our own sins. But we should not be afraid to speak the truth, even when the truth is not popular. And never should we despair of being alone in this unjust world. Therefore, as people with broad and demanding political responsibilities, let us pray, not for success, but for fidelity. And let us always remember the final words of Isaiah's poetry with humility and hope:

O house of Jacob, come,
let us walk in the light of the Lord!