

Sunday 17th September 2006: Trinity 14. Proper 19 Year B. St Mary's.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is honoured and revered as a fearless, tireless, godly campaigner for racial justice in South Africa. He has often been accused by his opponents of mixing religion and politics. Of course, Desmond Tutu was quite unapologetic for doing so. He often used to exclaim that he couldn't understand which Bible his critics were reading if they thought there was any separation between religion and politics. Certainly it was not the Christian bible, which was the foundation of his faith. In this Bible, under the God finally revealed in Jesus Christ, religion and politics were inseparable. And this morning's gospel is an example of how religion and politics, faith and social order go together.

First, Peter's response to Jesus direct question. "Who do you say I am?" "You are the Messiah" says Peter. The Christ. A politically loaded term.

There are echoes of Moses in the Old Testament book of Exodus, of his dialogue with God before the burning bush. "Who am I" questions Moses, "to take on the task you have given me?" "Don't question me," replies God. "I AM". Moses, of course, at that point, was on the verge of demanding freedom for his people from the Egyptian Pharaoh just as, in our gospel reading, Jesus was poised to make his final journey to Jerusalem to confront the powers there.

Moses had a political calling to gain freedom for his people. Jesus had a similar calling and in referring to Jesus as "Messiah" Peter was drawing attention to this. You are not just a prophet, says Peter to Jesus, you are the Messiah, a royal figure, with the power to restore the political fortunes of Israel. A revolution is at hand.

Was Peter right? Yes and no. Jesus was the Messiah and there was a revolution afoot but it would not come about through a demonstration of political power such as people were expecting. They were all longing for someone to come to free them from the oppression of the Roman colonists. So, lest there be any misunderstanding, Jesus sternly tells Peter and the others to say nothing about what had been said.

To make his point, Jesus introduces a another term: the Son of Man, also with echoes from the Old Testament, from the Book of Daniel. This book had been written two centuries before the time of Jesus when Judea was under the brutal domination of another foreign power. Daniel seeks to assure the Jewish people that, under the leadership of the Son of Man, they will survive their trials and tribulations. But before that could happen there was bound to be suffering. The Jesus of Mark's gospel identified

himself with this Son of Man but makes it clear that the path to glory was not to be straightforward. It led over the hill of crucifixion.

And so we come to a third politically-loaded term – crucifixion. To those who would be his followers Jesus says: you will have to deny yourselves and run great risks even to the point of taking up your own cross.

In the first century, the cross was an instrument of the very harshest political repression and punishment. It was reserved by the Romans for restless slaves, violent criminals and any who might be a threat to law and order in the Roman state.

And so the political implications of following Jesus become inescapable. They were inescapable for his contemporaries, they have been for Christians since like Desmond Tutu in our own time, and they are for us.

Following Jesus, then, means running risks, sticking our necks out. Bearing a cross is not simply something that is thrust upon us or comes to us like sickness as part of our human lot. It is a choice we make. It will not have, in our culture, the brutal, humiliating consequences of actual crucifixion. Nonetheless in our secular society it may mean going against the flow, making sacrifices, being the butt of ridicule.

One particular aspect of modern life provides a good example of the political implications of faith: climate change. For climate change is a reality to the causes of which we all contribute, from the effects of which we are all beginning to suffer and in the solution of which – if we are not too late – we can all have our part to play.

Earlier in the summer, the Bishop of London drew attention to this issue. He did so in the run-up to the publication of a Church of England booklet advising Christians on practical action they can take towards being more eco-friendly. Such action is one way of fulfilling our basic Christian responsibility to see and treat the world as God's gift.

In an interview with the Sunday Times the Bishop said that there was now (quote) “an overriding imperative to walk more lightly upon the earth.” He then went on, controversially, to highlight the importance of making lifestyle decisions with their environmental consequences in mind. “Making selfish choices such as flying on holiday or buying a large car”, he said, “are a symptom of sin.” “Sin is not just a restricted list of moral mistakes,” he went on, “it is living a life turned in on itself where people ignore the consequences of their actions.”

The Bishop's remarks prompted criticism. Predictably, the Daily Mail accused the Church of England of turning the Gospel into "a party political broadcast for the Greens" and said that it should focus instead on its shrinking pews. Airline chiefs were keen to detract attention from the global environmental consequences of cheaper flights and increased air travel. And an RAC executive told the Church of England and religious leaders to "stick to what they know best," claiming that decisions over what car to buy were basically "practical" and not moral choices.

The Bishop had stuck his neck out. He had intervened in political affairs. He had argued for sustainable living, at the same time urging the church to put its own house in order in this respect. He challenged lobbyists who wanted to protect profits and defend harmful products. And so he was criticised and ridiculed.

Taking up our cross and following Jesus is not then simply a private aspect of our own inner spirituality concerning our immediate relationships. Taking up our cross has a public, social, political dimension to it. There are matters in our society where as Christians we are called to take a stand. The risks we may run in doing so are unlikely ever to be as great as they were for Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa. But with such people as our inspiration let us not be afraid to challenge authorities who endanger God's creation or impoverish human life and to suffer in some small way for it.

In a few minutes two baby boys Zachary and Harvey will be baptized. At that moment they will be signed with the cross as a symbol of their Christian calling to stick their neck out. As we witness that moment, let us remind ourselves that it is our calling too.