

After the Vote – Trinity 6 2024

Ezekiel 2 vv 1-5 p831, Psalm 123, II Corinthians 12 vv1-10 p1165, Mark 6 vv 1-13 p1008

What did you think of the election? Disappointed? Ecstatic? Indifferent? Tentatively optimistic? Wary? How do our politics measure up on the scale of faith, hope and charity? Whatever you think of the vote, there are a number of concerning features. First of all the poor voter turnout, at 60% the second lowest since 1885. Living in a democracy, we have a duty to use our vote, even if we are so disillusioned we can only vote for the candidate or party we distrust least. There will be a member of parliament for each constituency and His Majesty's government must go on. *None of the above* is not an option.

Secondly, there is the widespread impression that many people did not vote positively for the candidates or parties they really believed would make a difference for the better, but negatively with the principal intention of ensuring the defeat of those they didn't want to win. Have the political class so lost our trust that we feel unable to enthuse about any of them? It is only fair to give the new government a chance. It won't be good for the country if they fail. There is a tremendous responsibility and they need our support and our prayers. Constructive criticism is one thing, opposition for opposition's sake is quite another.

Thirdly, the way this extraordinary election has turned out raises questions about our electoral system. Labour have won an enormous majority with only an increase of 1.71% in their share of the vote since 2019, when they lost spectacularly. The Conservatives proportionately lost far more seats than they did votes. The Liberal Democrats won 71 seats this time but only 11 in 2019, despite their share of the vote increasing by less than ½%. Reform won ½ million more votes than the LibDems this time, but 66 fewer seats. The Labour Government has a huge majority in the House of Commons, though ⅔ of the electorate voted for other parties or candidates. Sir Kier correctly pointed out that the government he heads, His Majesty's Government, exists to serve the whole country, not merely the people who voted for it. Similarly, constituency MPs represent all their constituents, not just those who are their supporters.

If we are uneasy about the political situation in our own country, so well may we be when we look overseas – not just at the autocratic regimes of which we expect nothing but repression, but also at our fellow democracies. In November the United States of America will almost certainly have to choose between two rival candidates for president, neither of whom, for different reasons, in many people, inspires much confidence. A number of European countries are apparently drifting towards the extreme right, raising the ghosts of Nazism and Fascism. The post-war consensus seems to be breaking down and populations throughout the democratic West are losing respect for the principles and parties by which we have been governed for the last seven or so decades – longer in countries such as ours and the US, somewhat more briefly in much of continental Europe. What has gone wrong? Many answers have been advanced, but it is my belief that the ultimate cause of this loss of direction is to be found in the Book of Proverbs chapter 29 verse 8: *Where there is no vision, the people perish*. If you don't know where you are going, how will you know which route to take? If you don't know where you are going, how will you even know if you get there?

Where there is no vision, the people perish is often cited in management training or by enthusiastic project leaders trying to inspire groups of listless conscripts with the boss's

latest bright idea. It is even abused in this way in church circles. *Where there is no vision, the people perish.* We must do something. This is something. So we had better do it.

But it's not just any vision which we have to follow. It's not true that *any dream will do*, *pace* Sir Timothy Rice and Lord Lloyd Webber. The clue is in the second half of the verse: *Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law* (תורה in the Hebrew, God's Law), *happy is he.* The Hebrew word for vision in the verse is חזון which means a vision or a revelation from God. It's not true that *any dream will do.* In our readings Ezekiel and Paul were vouchsafed visions by God and were both commissioned to do his work of proclaiming the Word. In the Gospel reading, the people of Nazareth were granted the most complete vision of God which can exist, Jesus of Nazareth, the Word Made flesh, and were too engrossed in the humdrum world to perceive the truth, whereas those whom He named apostles understood Him sufficiently that they too, like Ezekiel & Paul, received His commission.

While we're looking at the Hebrew, the word in the verse translated *perish* in the King James Bible is יפרע which means *without restraint, let loose, dissolute perhaps, falling apart, descending into anarchy, on the path to annihilation,* maybe. If we don't set God's revelation of Himself before us, we are on the road to destruction. *The wages of sin is death.* On a brighter note, *but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.* The word for happy is אשר, which means *blessed.* Happiness is linked with blessedness and blessedness with thankfulness in the languages of the Bible.

It is our failure to look to God which denies us happiness and sets us on the road to ruin. So we prayed in the collect, *Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire.*

Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he. A somewhat fanciful analogy. You walk to the station, not knowing your destination. You don't know which train to get on and you could end up anywhere. *Oh! Mr Porter, what shall I do? I want to go to Birmingham And they're taking me on to Crewe, Take me back to London, as quickly as you can, Oh! Mr Porter, what a silly girl I am.* Let's assume that we're not that silly and we have a vision of where we want to get to. Abraham, we're told, when instructed by God to set out for the Promised Land, *went out not knowing whither he went...For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.* In the Epistle to the Hebrews, this city is the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of Heaven, towards which we too are heading if we have the same faith as Abraham. Heaven is our vision, our destination, and the contemplation of Heaven determines the course of our life here on earth. *Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven,* by you & me as well as by other people!

But for the sake of this analogy, let's say our destination is not Heaven, but Paddock Wood. Knowing that much, we now know to take a southbound train from Cuxton or Halling. We're headed in the right direction. We've made the correct decision as we have when we decide to follow Jesus. That's what our nation, and all the nations of the world need to do, to decide to follow Jesus to that *city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.* Maybe some people can't be bothered to come with us to Paddock Wood: *these are they by*

the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. But we've made the correct decision.

But will we stay on the train? There's a delay and we get bored. There are other people in our carriage we don't much like. The toilets don't seem to have been cleaned lately. Are we tempted to get off at Snodland and get one going back the other way? *And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended.*

If we look out of the train window at New Hythe, we might think that there is a lot of work which needs doing there. Much of the area around New Hythe Station is a building site. Should we get off and help with the reconstruction? Maybe we should. If the new government has a vision of what this country ought to be, there is a lot to do in order to achieve that goal: sorting out our defence, our welfare and health care, education, policing, etc.. There is a lot to do on the way to the Kingdom of God and we shouldn't hesitate to roll up our sleeves and do our bit, so long as we don't lose sight of the final goal. *And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.*

When we get to Aylesford, we might get off and visit the Priory. The atmosphere there is so peaceful and holy that we see no need to continue our journey to Paddock Wood. We've arrived at where we want to be. Time for spiritual refreshment is important, but it cannot be a goal in itself. It would be selfish if we were to devote our lives to our own personal spirituality. We should have lost sight of the vision which God has set before us, that *city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day*, but the fourth commandment continues, *Six days shalt thou labour, and do all that thou hast to do.*

At Maidstone Barracks, we might be tempted to get off and change to another train at Maidstone East. The trains are faster from there, a fellow passenger might tell us. They are, but its an awfully long way round to Paddock Woof via Ashford or London. Stick to the strait and narrow pathway. Don't be seduced by alternative routes which superficially look easier than the Way of the Cross.

At Maidstone West, there are the fleshpots of Maidstone to distract or the possibility of a much more pleasant journey on a boat up the river rather than staying on the train, but you'll only get as far as Teston Lock. I admit that the *Wateringbury Arms* is so welcoming that a friend and I very nearly missed our train when we'd got off there. Yalding too is very tempting and you might think you've arrived at our destination when you see the sign for the Paddock Wood hop farm at Beltring, but you haven't. Persevere till you reach the end of the line. *These are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.*