

This is a time....

Reflections on the General Election

The recent announcement of a General Election surprised just about everyone. We now face questions as Christian disciples, not only about how we should vote, but what we and our churches should be doing and saying during the campaign. In the weeks leading up to the election the Joint Public Issues Team will be offering reflections and balanced analysis, seeking to support local Christians and churches as they engage with the issues, and working to keep the things we believe to be important on the political agenda. In this, our first resource, we offer some reflections on key biblical themes that will hopefully help put the events of the last week into perspective.

DON'T GIVE UP!

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

Colossians 1:16

“Oh no! Not again!” Was this your response to the news of the election? Voter fatigue, suspicion of the motives behind the election, or fear for the future of our country has led many people to feel fed up with politics.

As a Christian people we believe that, not only has our world and those who live in it been made by God, but the systems and structures that hold us together are part of God’s purpose too. We are made to live in community; a community that is ordered, structured and works for the good of all. To turn our backs on the processes that establish the Government of our society, or to recoil from the opportunity to remind all of those involved of the messages and priorities of God’s Kingdom, is to abandon a key element of our identity as a Gospel people.

This election may lead us into unfamiliar territory where established attitudes, narratives and priorities might feel out of place. Rather than causing us to back away from the challenge, it presents new opportunities for a people of God to explore the priorities and values of our faith, and how these can be pursued and articulated within the election debate.

This is a time for God’s people to pray for wisdom, to seek God’s purpose and to proclaim God’s truth, to seek the Spirit’s help to live and speak with courage and clarity. How can we use our vote well? How should we use our influence for good? How can we remind everyone involved and affected by this election that there is a higher authority in our world than any earthly ruler?

YOU MATTER, WE ALL MATTER

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:3-4

This is a time for God's people to make our voices heard. What should we be saying? Who should we be listening to – and whose voices are being drowned out?

DISAGREEING WELL

Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

Christians believe the straightforward truth that to be human is to be made in God's image and therefore to have intrinsic worth and dignity. We are invited to love God with every aspect of our being, which means that our feelings, thoughts, concerns hopes and dreams matter.

But in recognising our own humanity, we are also called to recognise the same intrinsic worth in others, and indeed, as people of the Gospel, to place others above ourselves.

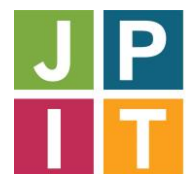
As the election campaign unfolds, what are the underlying motives and intents of the various political stories that emerge and those who promote them? Are we being asked to embrace agendas that simply serve our own self-interest? Are policies being promoted that place the interests of some above the needs and wellbeing of others? Are those who seek our vote serving their own interests or seeking to promote the common good?

What influences you? Sometimes we don't even notice how ideas, events or opinions have an impact on what we believe or do. Media coverage can affect the way we see things. The tone of some political debates and headlines recently has been unpleasant and divisive, a trend which may continue as the various parties compete for our attention and support.

One of the questions that we might ask as disciples of Jesus Christ is "what impact is all of this having on me?" As we think about our prophetic role as God's people, we might also consider what the impact is on wider society as we become accustomed to slurs, insults and accusations.

One of the key principles that we, as churches working together through the Joint Public Issues Team, have sought to embrace is to challenge narratives, assumptions and policies that seek to stigmatise and misrepresent others. During this election campaign, as a Christian people, what role do we have in challenging exaggeration, distortion and half-truth on the part of politicians and key media outlets? How do we guard ourselves and others against the harmful impact of such narratives and claims?

This is a time for God's people to seek truth and expose deceit. In what ways can we challenge language and ideas that harm? How can we model wholesome and honourable ways in which people of different perspectives and opinions can respectfully discuss and debate their opposing views?



WHAT (ELSE) MATTERS?

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things

Philippians 4:8

Brexit is likely to be the dominant issue of this campaign, even though Article 50 has already been triggered and individual MPs will have little power to shape the eventual agreement. But there is a very real danger that Brexit becomes the only issue, and that other important concerns and consequences are simply ignored or overlooked.

Our Scriptures remind us that we are not simply called to conform to the values and agendas of the world around us, but are to be a transformed and transforming presence in our society. We are invited to do more than simply respond and react to what is going on around us. Instead we are deliberately to seek out and commend those causes and concerns that are defined by truth, righteousness, honour and those other virtues Paul identifies in his letter to the Philippians.

As Christian people, what role and responsibility do we have to raise concerns, either through the questions we ask of canvassers and campaigners, or in the way that we use our collective voice and influence?

This is a time for the people of God to reflect afresh on those virtues that our Scriptures commend as being worthy of our attention and priority. How should these be lived out in the life of our nation, and what should we expect of those who are appointed to political office in the light of this? What are the questions we should be asking? What are the issues we should be raising? What do we need to keep in focus as the election campaign moves forward?

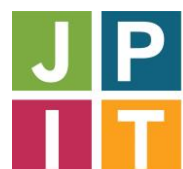
GOOD GOVERNMENT?

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

[Micah 6:8]

Much is being said about the need for strong Government and strong leadership. What do these ideas mean for us? Whilst a strong Government may be desirable or even necessary, there are models around the world which rightly attract widespread condemnation. A “strong” Government is not in and of itself a good thing. In modern democratic systems overwhelming Parliamentary majorities reduce the need for Government to listen and respond to other opinions.

We need to reflect not only on the power and strength of any given authority, but also its nature and virtue. Our Scriptures remind us that not only has God called for good and righteous leadership, but has also showed us what that looks like. The verse from Micah is only one example, but it commends a model of leadership that acts justly, loves mercy and walks humbly before God. Our Scriptures and traditions provide us with rich resources that describe to us the values and priorities of God’s Kingdom and repeatedly remind earthly rulers and citizens of their responsibilities before God.



As Christian citizens, we are not simply called to promote and defend our own opinions and concerns, but to be open to God's Spirit and to embrace the goodness and truth that is revealed in God's word.

This is a time for Christians to recognise that God has spoken into every era of history, and that our Scriptures have much to say about a good and wholesome society. What does good government and good leadership look like in the context of our national and global situation? How does God's word define goodness? How can we promote and affirm this in the emerging election debate? What does the Lord require of us?

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:17-18

It might seem hard to believe right now, but in just a few weeks the election will be over. Will it be business as usual? There is a danger that whatever the outcome, the average person might well see this as the moment to leave the politicians to get on with it. But these verses are a poignant reminder that seeking to do what is right is not simply a one-off decision but an ongoing responsibility that requires care and effort.

God's people are called to be a prophetic voice in society. Once the election is over, the task of government will begin. Whatever mandates our politicians might believe themselves to have, as a people of God we also have a responsibility to seek what is good, to speak out for what is right and to challenge what we recognise as harmful and unjust. Whatever the shape or form of our new Government, Christian citizens will have a role to play in seeking to influence and shape the kind of society that we all live in.

This is a time for Christians to think beyond the immediate events of the election campaign and to determine to stand for truth, justice, peace and well-being throughout the next parliamentary term and beyond. What is God saying to us through current events and the opportunities and challenges that we know await once the election is over? How should we be preparing for this? How do we commit to continue engaging with our elected politicians?

For more information and resources visit www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2017/

