

THE POLITICS OF JESUS



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Sunday August 30, 2009

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Introduction

Jesus died to atone for our sins and to redeem our sinful nature.

But he also died because he represented a threat to the way the world works, he stood opposed to the world system.

He was executed because of his politics...

His economic policy of debt forgiveness threatened to undermine the world's financial system.

His defense policy of loving one's enemies and praying for those who terrorize, would mean the end of all armies, the end of all wars, the end of all empires and patriotism, the end of all kings and superpowers.

But most of all he was killed to eliminate the possibility of his example being replicated in others. He was killed in the hope that the way he lived and the things he taught wouldn't initiate a community of people like him...a community indifferent to the appeal of affluence and nationalism, fame and posterity...a community who by embracing his politics would live exclusively for the benefit of the world around it:

- by caring for its sick
- and providing for its poor
- and welcoming its outcasts
- and seeking to reconcile wherever there is division and discord...

This may be a new approach to considering Jesus for some of us.

My plan is to present the facts as best I can based on scripture references most of us would be familiar with.

I have made copies of my notes available for further study - only because there may be more here than can be digested in one sitting. Also, it will give those of you who are more studious the opportunity to work through these issues on your own and challenge me later should on any point you disagree.

But first - if we could pray...

Sermon

For the last year I have been overwhelmed with the thought my confession that Jesus is Lord is too shallow. It is a religious conviction, a theological belief which means I believe God is real, that he has revealed himself in his Son Jesus and to believe in him is my ticket to heaven.

This kind of believing has been identified as 'personalistic faith'. It is the kind of faith which focuses on God and me, more on me than God...about God saving my soul, and about God causing me to spiritually grow. It is about God making me into a better husband and father, a more honest businessman, a more decent, law-abiding citizen, doing what he can in the best interests of his community and his country.

But what troubled me was the realization there was very little in the way I lived that was different than my neighbour. For sure our beliefs about God differed with many of our neighbours being either Muslim or Jewish - but essentially everything else was the same.

We all wanted what was best for our children, we all wanted to live in a safe community, we all saw the value of community service and we all wanted to retire with enough money to live comfortably until we died.

What hit me was the realization that were Jesus to move into my neighbourhood - there would be more to him that would differ from my neighbourhood than just his theology.

And so I began to ask myself the question - what would make him stand out?

And the more I asked myself the question the more I kept hearing this answer: his politics.

By politics I mean, the policies and process by which we as individuals and a society are governed. A politician is someone who initiates and oversees the policies and process by which we are governed. And although I am hesitant to call Jesus a politician because of the negative connotations associated with 'politicians', it would be fair to say Jesus is a politician in the sense that he came to initiate policies which are to govern us as a community of Christians. He came that God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. That's political! Think for example his policy on love - loving our neighbours, loving our enemies - confers on us huge social responsibilities. (see **Matthew 25:31-46, 1 John 3:17**)

Now combining religion and politics is a volatile mixture and many of us grew up being told they are the two topics one never talks about at social gatherings. With good reason it seems - given the Crusades, the wars in the Middle East, the slaughter of native and aboriginal peoples by European settlers in the name of 'God and king'.

Add to that the abortion debate, the controversy surrounding gay marriage, the discouraging of prayer in public schools, the disaster that was the Moral Majority and think, there is no way to mix politics and faith.

And so the inclination for us as Christians has been to retreat to a personalistic faith - to a faith which is essentially apolitical, individualistic and private...focusing on 'piety' issues - being honest, decent citizens praying that God might do something significant with our lives.

The problem with this position is that basically the whole Bible stands against it. Jesus wasn't just a religious figure, He is the Messiah, a title which speaks to his having political authority. As such he came to usher in God's kingdom which is good news to the poor and the breaking down of the walls separating Jews from Gentiles, women from men, rich people from poor people etc. (ref: **Ephesians 2:14-16**)

Jesus had little time or patience for a religion that was about tithing and personal holiness and ignored the weightier issues of justice, mercy and faith. (**Matthew 23:23**) He wasn't just interested in changing individual lives; he was equally interested in creating a new society built on policies which reflected his character and his authority. (**Matthew 6:10, 1 John 2:6**).

Think of the political implications of the many words prophesied about him centuries before he was born:

from Psalm 72:12-14

He will rescue the poor when they cry out to him;

he will help the oppressed who have no one to defend them.

He feels pity for the weak and the needy and he will rescue them.

He will redeem them from oppression and violence,

for their lives are precious to him.

from Isaiah 59:15b,16

The Lord looked and was displeased to find there was no justice.

He was amazed to see that no one intervened to help the oppressed.

So he himself stepped in to save them with his strong arm.

In advance of Christ's ministry, John the Baptist declared:

Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.'

The crowds asked, 'What should we do?'

John replied, 'If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food share with those who are hungry.' **Luke 3:9-11**

As Jesus begins his ministry he announces in his hometown synagogue the prophecy from Isaiah he has come to fulfill:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives

will be released, that the blind will see,

that the oppressed will be set free,

and that the time of the Lord's favour has come.' **Luke 4:18,19**

All of these prophecies are undeniably political. And all of them Jesus saw as his mission.

Now to do a detailed study of the Politics of Jesus would take weeks. Reading the gospels one discovers he has policies on everything from aid to investments, from prayer to self-promotion strategies. I have listed some of his policies available for follow-up study, but so as not to overwhelm, I am limiting my remarks here to his Economic policies and his policies on Military Defense.

The Messiah's Economic Stimulus Policies

- forgive people their debts (**Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4**)
- lend without asking for anything in return (**Luke 6:45**)
- the sale of assets by the wealthy to provide for the poor (**Luke 12:33, Acts 2:45, Acts 4:37**) with his overall economic objective: those who have much don't have too much and those who have little don't have too little. (**Exodus 16:18, 2 Corinthians 8:15**)

The Messiah's Defense Policy

- love your enemies, do good to them (**Luke 6:35**)
- pray for those who terrorize you (**Matthew 5:44**)
- do not retaliate, turn the other cheek, do not resist an evil person (**Matthew 5:38,39**)

The Messiah's Policy on War and Disarmament

- those who live by the sword will die by the sword (**Matthew 26:51**)
- God's children are those who work for peace (**Matthew 5:9**)

I'm not so sure were Jesus to run as a candidate in the area I live in - Thornhill - he'd get that many votes. I can't imagine him doing well among the Bay Street elite or corporate CEOs.

This business of debt forgiveness, and the voluntary redistribution of wealth would be a real turn-off.

But I can imagine him doing well in the communities of Jane/Finch and Regent Park.

His non-retaliatory, no defense policy would make him unpopular in the military establishment whether here, or in Washington, Moscow or Tehran.

But in places like South Africa 15 years ago and more recently in Northern Ireland, his non-retaliatory policies have been instrumental in stopping years of bloodshed and healing huge racial and religious divides.

In a word, the politics of Jesus favour poor people and demand much of rich people. They side with those who are oppressed and demand much of those who are in power. As he put it: 'to whom much is given, much is required'. (**Luke 12:48**)

This is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is repeatedly declared to be 'good news to the poor'. (**Matthew 11:5**) It is not because when the poor die they go to heaven and enjoy what they couldn't enjoy here. Jesus said: 'Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (**Luke 6:20**) not 'Blessed will be the poor for theirs will be the kingdom...'

Listen to what happens when the good news takes hold of a people and reshapes their community. These descriptions are taken from the book of Acts depicting the social impact of the gospel within the early church:

'All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship and to sharing in meals...and all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need...

'There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.' **Acts 2:42,45; Acts 4:34**

This is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to the poor. Because when the good news takes hold of a people the poor are provided for. They are given an equal place among the wealthy from whom they previously had been excluded.

Before the gospel happens in a community the wealthy live in the rich part of town and the poor live in ghettos and on the street...

But when the gospel happens, the wealthy and poor live together, they eat together, they share their possessions together and among them there is unity, generosity and joy!

Christ calls us to be the social alternative to the way the world works, reflective of a different kind of rule, a different kind of economics and a different kind of social relations than exist in the world. His politics are not coerced, they are - without being sappy or melodramatic - the politics of love, freely adopted by a group of people committed to becoming poor as he had become poor, and loving their enemies the way he loved his enemies.

This is the life of the cross, the life he calls us to, the life by which God's kingdom advances. This is the life that got him crucified.

But why? If the gospel is good news to the poor, then why was Jesus crucified?

Because of how it would change the world for those in charge.

Remember that passage in John's gospel when Pilate tries to release Jesus, the response of those in charge?

'If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar.'

'What crucify your king?' Pilate asked.

'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered. (**John 19:12, 15b - see also John 11:45-53**)

In the end, the resident political and religious authorities chose Caesar's rule over God's.

Why?

Because of what they stood to lose were Jesus in charge and not Caesar.

The religious leaders were threatened by Jesus' policy that among God's people 'there is to be only one Teacher, the Messiah, and all of us equal as brothers and sisters'. (**Matthew 23:8**)

The wealthy were traumatized by the news of a kingdom whose entrance requirements were to 'sell all one's possessions and give them to the poor' (**Mark 10:21**)

The Zealots, the Jewish rebels looking to overthrow the Romans, were offended by a Messiah who rather than lead his people into battle would command his people to love and pray for their enemies. (**Luke 6:35**)

The Romans were threatened by someone other than Caesar claiming to be the Son of God. (**John 19:8**)

It wasn't just the religious who had a part in Christ's execution, it included all those threatened by his politics.

Years ago there was a book written by a Christian named Hal Lindsay entitled 'The Late Great Planet Earth'. It was bad theology and even worse end times theology (eschatology) - but the combination of the two meant the book sold millions.

I was a young Christian at the time the book was released and I remembered being thoroughly raptured by it. But there was something in its content which even as a young Christian I sensed was wrong.

The book claimed that the cross for Jesus was Plan 'B'. It was the route he had to reluctantly take when he realized Plan 'A' wasn't going to work. Plan 'A' according to Mr. Lindsay would have been for the Jews to accept Jesus as their Messiah and with their acceptance Jesus would mount the white horse of God's Divine Wrath and kill all his enemies. What Mr. Lindsay failed to grasp is that is not how the politics of Jesus work. That is not how the Kingdom of God comes.

The Kingdom of God comes when the Son of Man comes and gives his life as a ransom for many. (**Mark 10:45**)

The Kingdom of God comes when Jesus Christ, even though he is rich, yet for our sakes becomes poor, so that we through his poverty might be rich'. (**2 Corinthians 8:9**)

The cross is not Plan 'B'. It is God's Plan A'. As the renowned American theologian John Howard Yoder writes:

Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gave his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who spitefully use him.

The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come. (The Politics of Jesus - John Howard Yoder, 1972)

This is the turn in the road as it applies to the unique way Jesus does politics. In the very place where other people in authority establish their authority by flexing their muscles, Jesus exercises his authority by not resisting the injustice committed against him.

Rather than stake his claim as the Son of God, he accepts being punished as a criminal and is crucified with other criminals.

He rejects the option he has as God's Messiah to lead a holy crusade to claim what is rightfully his.

He rejects the option of a 'just war' because He is the Prince of Peace.

He endures the poverty of being stripped of everything he has for the sake of making many rich.

This is how the Kingdom of God comes.

So what does this mean for us?

To answer that question I want to conclude with a story most of us have heard many times. Reading from Mark's gospel chapter 10: verses 17-27.

As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good.

But to answer your question, you know the commandments: 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.'

"Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young."

Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!"

This amazed them. But Jesus said again, "Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God.

In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"

The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked.

Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God."

At the moment this man encounters Jesus his religion is the epitome of 'personalistic faith'. He is decent, law abiding, wealthy and influential - the ideal candidate for church membership anywhere. But tragically, he has allowed his

religion to blind him to the social ramifications of what real faith in God means...providing for the poor and the loss of social status by accepting the radical call of Jesus on his life.

Possessions and social standing had so taken a hold of him they choked the possibility of his embracing God's kingdom. He was too caught up in his money to even imagine how he could ever live without it. Given the choice of either the kingdom or his money, the choice of God or his social standing, he couldn't part with his money or his social standing even though he knew he'd be much happier if he could!

Is this passage intended for us?

Absolutely. There is no exempt clause in this passage. True it was said specifically to this one man, but then so too was the imperative to be 'born again' said specifically to one man. This passage about our forsaking all to follow Jesus is as much for us as the new birth is for us. Both are impossible without God but truly both are required.

If you're squirming about now, you're not alone. I have been squirming over this passage since I first heard it in Sunday School. Some things Jesus tells us are meant to permanently disquiet us and this is one. It is as impossible to us as it was to this rich young man. But only because we look at it the wrong way around.

If we were to take all we have and live among the poor, our exposure to the things they suffer and the things they don't have would make us want to sell what we had even if we were left with nothing. This is how the love of God worked in Jesus and this is how the love of God works in us.

That is why Jesus gave this prescription to the rich man as to how one inherits eternal life. He prescribed what Jesus himself was doing...selling all he had for the benefit of many.

And this is his prescription for us: Go out and get among the poor. Sell what we have so the poor aren't starving or homeless. This is how the Kingdom of God advances. When our actions mirror the politics of Jesus, we become the living evidence that Jesus is Lord, not only of what we believe about God, but Lord of what we do with our money, our social standing and our lives.

If following Jesus isn't making us poor, if it isn't causing us to turn the other cheek, if it isn't reducing our rank in the world - then somewhere, somehow we have substituted our political agenda for his. We are pursuing our own interests and not his, our own kingdom and not his.

Our distinction as Christians - in our neighbourhood and in the world - lies in our willingness as a community to go and provide for the poor; in our willingness to go and be peacemakers where there is violence and social unrest; in our willingness to abandon social privilege to identify with those who have none.

Personally I believe we're up to the challenge.

For the past 5 years I have had the pleasure of seeing up close how individuals and groups from our church are connecting with the homeless and with youth at risk, with the elderly and the institutionalized, with refugees and the poor.

I can't begin to tell you what I have learned from those of our congregation who wash the feet of the poor, or who sing and do magic routines for those who are chronically homeless, or who serve those alienated by mental illness, or who befriend prostitutes and others living on the street; who connect with 'at risk' youth through sports programs and social agencies, or who go to faraway places like Mali and Bolivia to build community health centres or who host dinner parties for refugees or who lead conga lines of people in wheelchairs to dance; those who pray and those who remind us that church is not a building but a mission out there in the world with God in the lead...

But we have only just begun. The best is yet ahead, the real sacrifices still to be made, and joy beyond anything we can imagine still to be experienced.

As we increase our engagement with the poor, the economics of Jesus will kick into gear among us. Wealth will get re-distributed, rich and poor will eat at the same table and God's kingdom will advance. The strangers we fear will become welcomed in our homes. Our homes will become theirs. And God's kingdom will advance.

As we pray to bless our enemies, the politics of Jesus will kick into gear. We will learn how to be peace-makers even as others cry out for vengeance. And God's kingdom will advance.

I mentioned earlier how the leaders in Jesus' time chose Caesar over God because of what they stood to lose were Jesus in charge.

I think many of us are in the same predicament. If we had to choose between Jim Flaherty, the Federal Minister of Finance and Jesus as to who we'd prefer as our Finance Minister, we might choose Mr. Flaherty because of what we'd stand to lose if Jesus were in charge. Jesus we would just as soon assign to First Minister of Religion and Spirituality and leave the serious matters of Finance and the Economy to someone else more practical, less disruptive, more inclined to leave things be.

The question I want to leave us all to wrestle with...if Jesus isn't our Minister of Finance, aren't we being dishonest in claiming that in our lives he is Lord of all?