

The only thing worse than a preacher talking politics, is a preacher who doesn't talk politics.

There are people - within and beyond the church - who are sure that religion and politics shouldn't be mixed. You can understand why they think that way. Religious extremism seems to breed political instability - and not just overseas.

When politicians and religious leaders appear on the same platforms, and use the same 'family values' language, it's a sure sign that both groups are afraid of something. And you can bet that what they're afraid of has nothing to do with broad, compassionate, sensible leadership.

Faithful people have political ambitions - and that's ok. Faithful people cast votes, and so should be informed and able to consider their choices. My faith influences my approach to political events, and that's ok. But politics and religion shouldn't be the same. If my political ambition is to install a religious system - people should complain loudly. If my religious ambition is to dominate the political landscape - to require people to think and worship and believe like me...people should resist.

Jesus is not a political figure, but his faith puts him in opposition to political ideas, policies and personalities. And in the social climate of the day, his faithfulness also puts Jesus in opposition to religious folks who have hitched their wagon to the predominant political voices in the region.

The only thing worse than a politician with no religious conviction is a politician who is a religious zealot.

Jesus proves himself utterly fearless in his contempt for those who blur the lines between politics and religion - nowhere more clearly than in our reading from Luke chapter 13.

Remember the 'render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto God what is God's?' You may think it is just about paying the temple tax (with coins bearing Caesar's image no less) but this often mis-used saying of Jesus is also concerned with our worldview.

To whom does our loyalty belong? The Scripture tells us that "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." The law of the land tells us how we ought to behave within the boundaries of a particular country. Both Scripture and the law of the land have authority over us- especially those of us who believe.

So where do we draw the line?

In Luke 13, Jesus helps us decide. He lives in occupied territory, subject to Roman law by virtue of the armed presence in the land and bound by Jewish law by virtue of the covenant he was born into. His faith helps him - as it does many others - to endure the Roman occupation as a temporary thing in the grand eternal nature of God's care and concern. But the situation in occupied Palestine is complicated. Concessions have been made by religious leaders - an unnatural truce seems to have been arranged. Wanting to survive in a hostile political environment, an awkward coalition is in place.

The Pharisees come to Jesus with inside information: you'd better get out of town - Herod wants you dead. Jesus treats this advice with contempt. But then he offers up a speech that at first seems puzzling.

He mourns the state of affairs in Jerusalem - the heart of religious observance and also the 'capital city'; the centre of political power in the region. Jesus' sadness at the state of this beloved city suggests that the lines are blurred between politics and religion. "Your house is left (desolate) to you..." other translations suggest Jesus is talking about the abandonment of the temple - a collapse of religious authority. That's what happens when religion covets political power.

We have our own experience with the careless intersection of religion and politics. We have endured the suggestion (from one group or another) that 'our nation needs to get back to God.' We have heard politicians shamelessly court religious voters with vague promises. The easiest thing would be to ignore it all and wait for Christ's return, but since that doesn't seem immanent, we must be prepared to carefully consider the options in front of us.

Jesus, as always, is our guide in this.

What kind of world do you long for? Is it a world where people of integrity must hide to avoid the wrath of the 'Herod of the day?' Is it a world where diversity of opinion and belief is discouraged out of fear? Is it a place where 'righteous anger' too often turns to deadly violence? This is the world Jesus knew, and it is the world we inhabit. But Jesus stood against the cruelty of oppressive politics and marched into the heart of religious exceptionalism and gently and fearlessly proved those approaches to be powerless.

To all appearances, Jesus' approach was a failure. Arrested in the night - tried in secret - condemned and executed in a most horrible and public fashion. So much for fearlessness.

But three days later, when the work was complete, the true nature of Jesus' mission was redeemed. The worst that the unholy alliance of church and state - a perpetually broken system - the worst punishment the system had to offer was no match for the redeeming, renewing power of God.

Jesus is fearless - and we can be fearless - because of God's desire to redeem and repair what we have misappropriated and left for lost. That includes religious systems, political systems, family systems, social systems...anything we have claimed for Caesar, God gently and patiently waits to reclaim.

So, Jesus is determined to finish what he started; to go to Jerusalem - to endure the worst that the political system and the religious institution has to offer. And then we will discover that God has something better in mind; something that should affect the way we engage with the systems and institutions of the world.