**Engaging with Politics**

*Introduction*

So this afternoon we’re going to be thinking about ‘engaging with politics’. In my 4 years as a student there was a general election, the Scottish independence vote, the EU referendum, and then another general election. And that’s just what was going on in our own country – and it’s still continuing today as we live in such turbulent times! Big politics is something that people are always talking about, and everywhere I we’re being told that we must vote, we must be engaged.

But as these conversations are going on, it seems clear was that people simultaneously believe that human government is able to solve all of our problems…and yet it’s doing a pretty poor job at it! We hear people saying “There’s no one who represents what I believe”. In Christian circles this leads to either a tribal equating of being a Christian with a political position (something that’s especially prevalent in the states where “evangelical” has essentially been transformed into a political term) or a general detachment and isolationism; where Christians see themselves as above and indifferent to the affairs of this world.

This afternoon the plan is to look at a few places where the bible does speak explicitly about issues of earthly authority, the state, the government; and of Christian involvement in that. Places that give us principles, categories, and lenses, which we can use to look at and think about politics, and how we engage with it.

Hopefully there will be lots of space for discussion, but we do need to make sure that our hearts are ready to hear the bible speak to us, and to hear God speaking through one another. There’s an old saying that says the two things you shouldn’t speak about in polite company are “religion and politics”. We’re going to be doing both of those today, so let’s make sure our conversations are filled with love and humility. Let’s also ask God to help us with that, and with all that we’re going to be talking about now, as we pray. Let’s pray.

***[pray]***

Great, so to kick things off, it’s worth setting the scene of where our thoughts are at the moment, and the places where the stuff we’re going to be talking about can be applied. So with the people around you have a discussion of those questions at the top of the sheet, and we’ll feedback shortly.

Great, it would be good to hear what you were discussing there, so first, in what contexts do we engage with politics? And second, what is the purpose and role of human government, and how does politics fit into this?

Great, keep that stuff in mind as we go through the seminar, and be thinking about what it looks like to apply this stuff in those areas. For now though let’s look at the bible.

*Jesus Christ is Lord*

The first place we’re going to look might surprise you, because it’s Matthew 28:18-20 – “the great commission”. Could someone read it for us.

Throughout the bible God is declared and shown to be in control of everything – especially human governments. Great and small leaders are described as being God’s servants, he hardens Pharaoh’s heart to Moses requests for the Israelites, he is sovereign over each king of Israel, he raises up the Assyrians to bring judgement on the Israelites, and king Nebuchadnezzar to bring exile. He softens the heart of Persian King to fund the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He lays out the rise and fall of empires hundreds of years before they happen.

When we get to the New Testament, and Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus, we see God’s sovereignty over all earthly powers most clearly as the kingdom of heaven bodily breaks in, in the form of Jesus. Jesus comes saying “the Kingdom of God is near”. At the resurrection of Jesus we see the victory of the Kingdom and we have Jesus final words recorded in Matthew: “all authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples…” *All* authority in heaven, and *on earth*.

The starting point for our thinking about law, politics, and government is that God is in control, and these things are not ultimate. It has no bearing on the Kingdom of God who is the Prime Minister of the UK. Or the president of the United States. Whether or not we’re part of the EU, and whether or not this or that law is passed. There is no impact on the Kingdom of God from the politics of this world, because Jesus Christ is Lord, and he has *all* authority in heaven and on earth. Our first principal when engaging with politics is that God is greater than any earthly power, and his will *will* be done. He has the authority.

And yet he has sent us out into the world, and he has a calling for each of us. Jesus Kingdom is not of this world, but it has broken into this world, and his authority still stretches over it all. You know when God created man and woman in Genesis 1 he gave them the mandate, the instruction, the role to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground”. And now in Matthew 28 the God-man Jesus Christ, the second Adam, the one who has and will complete the mandate given to man sends us out to be a part of that mandate by making disciples. Making disciples means bringing people into the Kingdom, into the lordship of Christ.

When thinking about politics we must remember that God is in control and things of a political nature are not ultimate; but God has sent us into the world to be ambassadors for Christ’s kingdom in a foreign land, calling people to acknowledge Jesus authority. Part of being ambassadors for God’s kingdom is taking opportunities to uphold righteousness. This is something for every part of life, in every thought and word and deed with moral implications we are called to uphold righteousness. And so that will include our engagement with politics. The results and outcomes of the politics of our day are not ultimate, but it does present us with opportunities to uphold righteousness, and as Jesus people we must take those opportunities.

So, with the people around you, have a discussion about the 2 questions at the bottom of the page, and we’ll come back together again shortly.

Great…

*The Biblical Role of Government*

Flipping over, we’re going to look at the main passage where the Bible talks about human governments – the first half of Romans 13. Could someone read the passage printed there.

Great, so what does this passage tell us about earthly governments? With the people around you.

What makes a human government legitimate? Is it some social contract made somewhere back in the mythical, mystical mist of time? Is it because of votes in an election – ‘for the people, by the people’? Is it because of economic necessity or some psychological need to be controlled? No. The idea of a human government is a deeply biblical idea. Romans 13 shows us again that it is God who is in control, and that he has established earthly authorities – all of them, no matter who they are and what they stand for. Governments have legitimacy to rule as they are given it by the one with all authority.

But what Romans 13 also shows us, is that governments are established for a particular purpose: they are to commend the one who does good, and punish the wrongdoer. A government does good when it maintains civil order and peace; and provides a stage for us to obey God’s command to fill the earth and subdue it; to make disciples of all nations. To live as we read in 1 Timothy v2 ‘peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness’. The purpose of all government should be to bless those within the scope of its authority by upholding moral righteousness: upholding God’s law.

The trouble is that no earthly kingdom will perfectly reflect the character and authority of God. God establishes governments with a purpose, but rulers abuse their authority and oppose God. Supremely this is what happened at Eden when God gave authority to man to rule, and he overstepped his authority in opposition to God. But this is something we see repeated throughout the bible and throughout history as many earthly authorities continue to overstep their power. In Acts chapter 4, the Jewish leaders ordered Peter and John not to speak or preach anymore in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter and John respond by saying “which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges!”. They disobey this instruction from an earthly authority.

[summary]

Let’s have some discussion about Romans 13 now, so where you are, have a discussion with the people around you about those 3 questions at the bottom of the sheet, and we’ll come back together shortly.

*The Biblical Role of Kingdom Ambassadors*

The third passage we’re going to look at now is in Jeremiah 29. The passage was a little too long to fit in the handout so do open up your Bibles to Jeremiah 29 – if you’ve got a 2011 NIV it’s on page 789 – just after Isaiah.

Just to establish some context, this section is a letter written from the prophet Jeremiah who is in Jerusalem, to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar assaulted Jerusalem 3 times. The first time they captured the elite and best young men of the land and took them back to Babylon. This first time is when Daniel and his friends were taken to Babylon – so when Jeremiah is writing Daniel is already in the political structure of Babylon. In the second assault on Jerusalem about 6 years later, there is a much wider capturing of the people of Judah, and transporting to Babylon; and it’s this second wave of people to whom is writing. He writes to encourage them, and to instruct them.

The New Testament, especially the book of 1 Peter, uses the language of ‘exile’ to speak about Christians living in the world. In 1 Peter 1m the letter is addressed to “God’s select, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces…”. In verse 17 we are told to “live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.” In chapter 2:11 Peter writes “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires”. We are exiles here in the world, living as foreigners, and so what Jeremiah writes to encourage and instruct the Jewish exiles in Babylon, we can hear as God writing to us!

So could someone read Jeremiah chapter 29, verses 1 to 13 for us? Thanks. Jeremiah’s message is that they’re going to be there a while – 70 years he’s told them – so make the best of it!

First, provide for you families: v5 get a home, get a garden, get a job. V6 Get married, have kids, get a family. In other words: be involved! Be involved, be responsible, where you are, where God has put you, in the new culture. They were surrounded by a hostile environment, people who didn’t hold their values, did not believe in the true God. We too are surrounded by a system that does not agree with (or at least does not sympathise with) Christian values, and in some cases is actively hostile toward Christian values. As citizens of the kingdom of God but living in a foreign land God has called us to be engaged and permeating throughout society to be salt and light: preserving from decay and exposing darkness. Standing for righteousness and God’s law. Be involved where God has put you.

The Israelites Jeremiah was writing to were living as captives in a totalitarian, autocratic regime – a monarchy. We have the luxury of living in a democratic society where we can say what we believe when we cast our vote. Very different to many societies historically and around the world today. So we should! We should vote, we should voice our concern in the public discourse. We should be involved where God has put us.

Second, be prayerful, seeking the best for your country. The letter continues in v7 “also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you in exile.” What does that look like? “Pray to the Lord for it. Because if it prospers you too will prosper.” What is he saying? Their welfare is bound up with the welfare of Babylon; so don’t start a revolt, a riot, an insurrection - pray!

I think that many of us believe our country is in trouble. We can see that our country needs God’s help. We understand that we need God to forgive our sins and heal our land, and prayer is our declaration of dependence on him for that. Paul wrote to timothy and he said “I urge, then, first of all, he petitions, prayer, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our savour.” (1 Timothy 2). Do you want to please God? Then pray for the government. What better way is there for us to be engaged in politics than to be praying? Praying for those in power to be fulfilling the task for which God has appointed them, praying that they will uphold righteousness. Pray widely for our country: what you ask for in prayer is infinitely more important than what you vote for in elections.

Third, be careful who you listen to. V8 says “”. In their time there were men who were writing their own letters, giving their own messages, which went against everything Jeremiah was saying. We can see one of them in the previous chapter 28, where the false prophet Hananiah says the exile is only going to be 2 years, so don’t be involved, don’t be praying – just wait it out.

Every election cycle, every day when the next debate is brought to the commons, we hear messages from all sorts of perspectives, and all kinds of sources. We’ll hear from each candidate things which are true, and things which are not true. So what do you do when you hear so many different messages? You think. You learn. You get informed, long enough to know what the real issues are. You identify the falsities, and you do not let you deceive you. We need to be informed, we need to be involved, we need to be engaged. Push the persons aside and think of issues, test them against truth as it is revealed in scripture, and as it is lived out.

Fourth and finally, be hopeful in your calling. Verse 10-13 “…”. Here’s the big picture: get involved, but have a light grip. You’re going to be there 70 years, but you’re coming home. So as you live your life in this temporary, earthly environment; keep your eye on the permanent, heavenly environment you’re going to – that’s the message for us! We’re here for a lifetime, we’re not here for all time. And we’re back to God’s sovereignty. God’s in control. He says “I will fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place [Jerusalem]”. Nebuchadnezzar is on the throne, but God is in control. We can rest in God’s sovereignty at any time. Ultimately it does not matter who is in downing street, because it has no effect on the unalterable truth that God is sovereign. The kings rule, and we in a democracy can influence that king, but God overrules. God is sovereign.

[Discussion]

*Conclusion*

Let’s turn over to the back now. We’ve looked at three key passages and referenced a few others, to try and explore what the bible has to say about earthly governments, and the role of Christians within that.

We started in the great commission, where it’s clear that Jesus is the one in control, and our primary calling in this world is to make disciples of all nations. This means that our call is greater than any political ideology or earthly allegiance, but to uphold God’s righteousness.

Romans 13: view of the role of government.

Jeremiah 29: our place in the world.

[Questions]

[Explain further reading]