THE HEALING OF THE NATIONS

Political Reflections on the Lectionary

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Preface

The following is a collection of lectionary reflections, written over the course of three years for the Political Theology Today blog. The reflections explore a wide range of political themes from scriptural texts from Old and New Testament. I have arranged them in scriptural order for ease of reference.

When I was first invited to take on the role of contributing editor to the Politics of Scripture section of the Political Theology Today blog by the then Managing Editor of the blog, Brad Littlejohn, I never expected that, three years later, I would have written a book's worth of material. But, quite unintentionally, this is what I have ended up doing.

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Alastair J. Roberts

The Politics of Abraham's Foreskin

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

In Genesis 17 God establishes his covenant with Abram, giving him the new name, Abraham—'Father of a Multitude'. Abraham is ninety-nine and only has one child, Ishmael, born to his wife Sarai's maid, Hagar. God promises him that he will open the womb of Sarai—who is granted the name Sarah—that she will bear a son and that she will be the mother of nations. In the context of this promise of a son and as the seal of the covenant, God gives Abraham the rite of circumcision.

The character of the rite of circumcision is not irrelevant: it is a lasting mark upon the male sexual organ, rendering the flesh of Abraham and his people a site of divine meaning. In the context of Genesis 17, it highlights the intergenerational character of the covenant, the claim that God makes upon Abraham's sexual activity, and—mostly importantly—the covenant promise that undergirds his relations with his wife, Sarah, and will secure its issue.

The raw physicality of the covenant sign may come as a shock to those with delicate sensibilities. Perhaps it is for this reason that this week's lection elides the part of the passage that speaks of it. Yet the fact that this foundational text pays so much attention to the foreskin of Abraham and to the womb of Sarah is a matter worthy of reflection. In opening the womb of Sarah and claiming Abraham's flesh and sexual agency with the rite of circumcision, the bodies of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants came to bear and to perpetuate covenant meaning.

As Paul Kahn has observed, the story of Abraham in Genesis punctures a liberal myth of the separation of private and public, of sex and politics.[1] God's claiming of the flesh and sexual agency of Abraham and Sarah ensures that the intergenerational project of the family can be one that sustains covenant purpose and identity and yields the promise that Abraham and Sarah will become a great nation. Sexual relations—on account of their procreative potential—are a vocation in service of a higher public purpose, turned towards the task of (re)producing covenantal and societal meaning. It is out of the love and calling of the family that politics grows: the promise of the nation cannot be detached from the claiming of the foreskin and the opening of the womb. Those who refused the covenant claim upon their sexual organ were excluded from the covenant project (v.14).

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[1] Paul Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in its Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)

Likewise, it is through the promise of *a particular son*—Isaac—that the promise that Abraham will become a great nation is refracted. Many want sharply to divide the private realm of the family from the public realm of the state. However, in our love for and training of our children we aren't just preserving the species, but are sustaining and developing the bonds of identity and meaning that transcend generations and constitute the very fabric of society. As Neil Postman expresses it, 'Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.'[2] In the following chapter of Genesis, in speaking of the promise that Abraham will become a mighty nation, YHWH declares:

> I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.[3]

The promise of the covenant nation that is sealed with the claiming of Abraham's sexual organ will be realized through the loving pedagogy of the family. Politics and society are conceived in the bedroom and are cradled in the family.

This political vision of sex and family is coupled with recognition of the disastrous effects for the health of the

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[2] Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1994), xi

[3] Genesis 18:19

polity entailed by sexual anarchy and family disintegration. Such a perverse connection between sex and polity is typified in the city of Sodom, where sex has become violent, lawless, and sterile, the body the source of its own rebellious meanings, rather than the bearer of covenant purpose and promise.[4] Kahn speaks of pornography in this context, as the sundering of the connection between sex and the reproduction of meaning, primarily seen in the bearing of children:

> Pornography is a form of sexuality shorn of the ordinary, generative characteristics of the body. The pornographic act produces no offspring: no children, no discourse, no enduring relationship to an other, no useful products. It is marked by the absence of labour in both of the biblical senses. It is episodic; it exists neither as a form of historical memory nor as a claim upon the future.[5]

Pornography's vision is one of freedom from the responsibility of history and the shackles of sex as the generation of meaning. It is a wilful assertion, albeit an impotent one, of our sexual autonomy.

In our own day, although marriage and family may never have been more vexed as political issues, there is a steady movement towards the privatization and deinstitutionalization of sexual relations and marriage. Marriage is being shorn of a *telos* that exceeds the private

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[4] Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in its Place*, 187

[5] *Ibid.* 204

ends of the parties within it, increasingly rendering the actual form of the union as a bespoke one and the conformity of society's behaviour to its moral norms an entirely optional matter. Marriage becomes purely a realm of private lifestyle choices rather than a matter of participation in an intergenerational societal project that imposes expectations upon our sexual and relational conduct. The vision of autonomous sexuality, freed from the labour of history—a vision most fully expressed in pornography—has become paradigmatic for an ascendant vision of marriage.

The story of YHWH's gift of circumcision as the sign of his covenant with Abraham has unsettling resonances for contemporary liberal visions of both sex and politics. It suggests that even the privatized and autonomous vision of sexuality held out in the antipolitics of pornography is politically constitutive, that any reinvention of the family is a reinvention of our politics and *vice versa*. It leaves us with the question of what happens to politics when the family abandons its political vocation. Is a political order once founded upon love, sacrifice, and procreation abandoned for the sterility of technique and soulless legislation? Is the transcendence involved in the passing on of inherited meaning in our children lost to the stifling immanence and immediacy of a politics of the pure present? Wherever we may stand on the particular questions regarding marriage that occupy our societies, these are issues that merit our reflection.

The Politics of Divine Judgment and Mercy

Genesis 18:20-32

In company with its sister city, Gomorrah, Sodom has become a potent and divisive symbol of a sexually licentious society and the terrible retribution that is fitting to it. Traditionally connected with homosexuality to the point of eponymity, Sodom and the biblical passages concerning it have been fraught topics in more recent theological debate. Its memory is not infrequently invoked in populist conservative Christian political commentary, where the destruction of Sodom for its supposed characteristic vice is used to justify attributing recent calamities to divine retribution upon America for its sexual and political sins.

The use of Sodom and Gomorrah as fearful examples of divine judgment is not foreign to Scripture itself. Indeed, Jude 7 claims that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was on account of their sexual immorality and that, through the judgment that fell upon them, they were set forth as an example of divine vengeance, anticipatory

symbols of a final apocalypse of God's justice (cf. 2 Peter 2:6).

In Ezekiel 16:46-52, the prophet presents Sodom as a 'sister' and an example to Jerusalem, claiming that Sodom was destroyed on account of its pride, fullness, idleness, indifference to the poor, and abominations, and makes the startling argument that Jerusalem's sins eclipse those of its more notorious sibling. Comparisons between Sodom and the people of Israel are common in prophetic declamations, in both the Old and New Testaments (Isaiah 1:9-10; 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14; Lamentations 4:6; Amos 4:11; Matthew 10:15; 11:23-24; Revelation 11:8). Sodom is, as it were, the textbook example of the divinely imposed fate that befalls a society that has descended into vicious decadence, morally inured in its sybaritic pleasures and heedless both to the word of YHWH and to the cries of the poor.

The exemplary significance of Sodom is underlined in a different fashion by the striking figural details within the Genesis narrative concerning it. Through such details, the story of Sodom comes to stand for something much greater than itself, its voice passing beyond the narrow constraints of its immediate context to enter a rich scriptural resonance chamber. Such biblical narrative possesses a 'musical' character, whereby it exceeds its particular temporal location, being expressive of some of the deepest themes that pervade divinely orchestrated history.

These themes are most noticeable in a slew of anticipatory allusions to the Exodus, the judgment and deliverance that stands at the heart of Israel's scriptural

self-understanding. Here are some representative instances:

1. YHWH appears in a human-like angelic form and consults with a prophetic leader of his people.
2. YHWH appears to Abraham by a tree, as he later appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Genesis 18:1; cf. Exodus 3:2-3).
3. Abraham twice refers to YHWH's 'passing by', employing the characteristic verb of the Passover (18:3, 5; cf. Exodus 12:12-13).
4. There is attention drawn to the doorway in connection with the firstborn son and the opening of the womb (18:9-11; cf. Exodus 4:22-23; 12–13).
5. YHWH speaks of the outcry that has come up against an evil and oppressive political power, and of his coming down to address the situation (18:20-21; cf. Exodus 3:7-9).
6. YHWH/the Angel of YHWH is associated with two messengers who go into the condemned city or nation as commissioned agents of testing, judgment, and deliverance (18:2, 16, 22; 19:1; cf. Exodus 4:14-17).
7. A night-time meal with unleavened bread is prepared (19:3; cf. Exodus 12:8, 15-20).
8. There is a threat to the family's life at the doorway, which becomes the site of angelic

protection to those eating inside, while those outside are judged (19:4-11; cf. Exodus 12:21-23).

9. The righteous, led by the two messengers, flee the city as the morning dawns (19:12-17; cf. Exodus 12:31ff.).
10. They are instructed to flee to 'the mountain' (19:17; cf. Exodus 3:12).

The above has been a lengthy preamble to the discussion of this week's lectionary reading. Yet it provides important background: only as we appreciate the exemplary and, indeed, paradigmatic significance of YHWH's judgment upon Sodom, both within current discourse and in scriptural witness will our current passage be given the exemplary and paradigmatic significance that it too merits by virtue of its connection with that event. Approaching our lectionary reading in such a light, I believe that we can identify four paradigmatic principles concerning divine judgment with general application.

First, the people of God are actively to seek the good of the nations. In the verses that immediately precede our reading, YHWH gives his rationale for speaking with Abraham concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah,

> 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he

> may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.'

YHWH's purpose in calling Abraham was that he might become a great nation, whose greatness was most powerfully manifest in the fact that all other nations would be blessed through him. Abraham and his descendants were to be agents of blessing, through 'doing righteousness and justice.' Introduced in such a manner, it is implied that YHWH's determination to consult with Abraham concerning Sodom and Gomorrah is driven, not by a precipitous urge to bring destruction, but to prepare Abraham to bring blessing through the pursuit of justice and righteousness.

Second, the prophetic people are admitted to the divine council. In Amos 3:7, the prophet declares, 'Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.' The prophet has access to the council of YHWH, and their intercession shapes the determinations that the council reaches. We see such an incident in the vision of Isaiah 6. The prophet speaks on behalf of the divine council to the people, and speaks on behalf of the people within the divine council. In Genesis 18, Abraham is made a participant within this council, given the prophetic privilege and responsibility of a role in the council's deliberations. Already this hints at the fact that Israel's future greatness and vocation as an agent of blessing may be wrought, less by military might and national splendour, than by prophetic faithfulness,

witness, and the pursuit of justice through intercession (cf. Jeremiah 1:9-10). As a prophetic people, Israel was to become an advocate for the nations.

Third, God's mercy outstrips our expectations. At first glance, it may appear that Abraham and YHWH are haggling over the number of people for whose sake YHWH will have mercy upon Sodom. Yet the presumed negotiations do not play out in anything like the manner we might expect.

YHWH does not counter Abraham's inquiry concerning the fifty righteous with a declaration of his willingness to spare the city for the sake of hundred righteous. There is no alternation of competing terms, steadily converging on a mutually acceptable figure. No, not a single one of Abraham's requests meets with the slightest resistance. Fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, even ten: YHWH would spare Sodom for even ten righteous.

The assumption that God is eager to condemn and that mercy can only be wrangled or finagled out of him with considerable difficulty is punctured beyond repair. God is rich in and delights to show mercy. As the prophets of YHWH are to communicate his grace and mercy to others, he trains them to become partisans of this grace and mercy, those accustomed to petitioning and pursuing it. Where they become eager to bring punishment, as the prophet Jonah was, they are challenged and corrected.

Fourth, God's justice is seen in preserving, not just the righteous, but others for the sake of the righteous. It is interesting to observe that Abraham doesn't simply

beseech God for the preservation of the righteous of the city of Sodom, but for the preservation of the entire city for their sakes. The slaying of the righteous with the wicked is, Abraham argues, inconsistent with God's justice, as he grounds his case upon God's character. When Lot and the small number of his family were delivered from the city, the city was condemned to destruction, yet while they remained, the whole city was protected on their account.

These principles have enduring relevance for Christian witness in society and politics. As the children of Abraham, we are called to be agents of blessing to all of the nations of the world. As a people of prayer, anointed by the Spirit of Pentecost, we are commissioned to petition the divine council on behalf of the nations and rulers of the world. Praying for the good and the justice of our rulers and nations is a primary dimension of the Church's social and political vocation. God has set us apart to seek his mercy for the sake of others.

We are to be those who seek to preserve the world from condemnation by our righteous and life-giving presence within it, tenaciously refusing to abandon it to its destruction. In prayer, in labour for justice, in pursuit of righteousness, in bearing of witness, we stay judgment and bring blessing, confident in the strength of divine mercy.

The Politics of the Memorial

Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

When we arrive at the point of the Passover—the climactic event to which the preceding chapters of Exodus have been building up—what has hitherto been a linear historical narrative of Moses and the plagues upon Egypt slips loose from its immediate temporal moorings. 12:1 first effects this temporal disjunction: what might appear to be the surprisingly redundant presence of the words 'in the land of Egypt' resituates the events described relative to the hearer and alerts us that the character of the text we are dealing with has changed. The narrative vantage point is implicitly thrust forward to some time after the Exodus has occurred: its vantage point is now that of the communal memory, looking back upon events that had occurred in the past.

Yet the narrated events themselves also undergo a shift. At this juncture, what was a contained historical account of events projects its reality out into a time beyond its own, breaking the temporal 'fourth wall'. This occurs through the various acts of institution that occur in these chapters. If the narrative vantage point implicitly shifts forward to a point where the worshipping

community is looking back upon the founding events, the events themselves—the first institution of the Passover—look forward to the life of the worshipping community: 'This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.' The temporal gap opened up between the narrated events and the narrative vantage point becomes a space where the founding events are first distinguished from, then related to, the time of the community. The eyes of the text meet those of the worshipping community.

This change makes more sense when we appreciate that Exodus 12:1—13:16 'does not present itself as an account of the departure from Egypt, but as a collection of *liturgical* texts … that shows how the *memorial* of this departure from Egypt is to be celebrated.'[6] Louis-Marie Chauvet remarks upon this phenomenon:

> [T]he great foundational moments of Israelite identity are recounted in liturgical terms. If the liturgy is not apparent in the text itself, it is because it is its pre-text. One does not tell the liturgy; one liturgically tells the story that one memorializes. The "liturgification" of the telling of stories about the early times is the best way to manifest their continuing foundational role in the identity of Israel.[7]

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[6] Cited in Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, translated by Patrick Madigan S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 192. Emphasis original.

[7] *Ibid.* 194

In the establishment of the liturgical memorial, the redemptive event establishes a new temporal pattern and structure, which will frame the time that is to come. The memorial is far more than bare *memorization* of lifeless facts or past occurrences: the memorial powerfully drives, animates, and orients the present. The memorialized event is an open reality, a past event that continues to yield its promise. In the memorial the waves that emanate out from the founding event strike us in regular temporal succession, moving and directing our own point in time. It is in *commemoration*—an 'act of *communal* memory'—that a people 'regenerates itself.' 'The past of its origins is snatched out of its "pastness" to become the living genesis of today.'[8]

Although it draws the people back to their origins, the celebration of the Passover also presses them forward, each successive Passover an impetus towards the greater fulfilment of the promise of the founding event. The memorialized deliverance of the Exodus came to be associated with promises of a greater, new Exodus: the waves once set in motion had yet to crash upon God's intended shore and, riding those waves, the people were suspended in the pregnant moment between God's past saving action and the anticipated future of his promise.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was

[8] *Ibid.* 233

> betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

By instituting his memorial within the context of the Passover, Jesus' deliverance is framed by the events and pattern of the Exodus. At this point the waves of the Exodus event that meet Israel at each successive memorialization of the Passover swell through the introduction of a new impetus. Jesus takes up and transforms existing symbols, disclosing both deep continuity and startling novelty.

> [T]here is every reason to suppose that the host at a Passover meal, then as now, would retell the story of the exodus, interpreting the actions and the elements of the meal in terms of that story, thereby linking the present company with the children of Israel as they left Egypt. The words of Jesus at the supper would therefore have been seen, not only with later hindsight, but at the time, as performing a similar function. They would have been understood as reinterpreting the meal in relation to himself, claiming that the kingdom-events about to occur were the

> climax of the long history which looked back to the exodus from Egypt as its formative moment.[9]

The founding time is subjected to a 'refounding', grounding it in a yet more determinative reality, in an event whose open promise exceeds even that of the original Exodus.

When we reach 1 Corinthians 11, it is clear that Christ's institution has assumed the status of a liturgical memorial, granting it comparable animating power in the life, prominence in the communal memory, and generating significance for the hope of the early Church that the Passover enjoyed within Israel. Christ's memorial holds the times together: it unites the time of the origin ('the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed' … 'you proclaim the Lord's death'), the time of the recurring waves of communal practice ('as often as this bread and drink the cup'), and the anticipated time of fulfilment to come ('…until he comes').

As in the prophetic tradition of a 'second exodus' that developed around the memory of the original Exodus, the originating event has also been recast as an anticipatory deliverance, to be surpassed by the eschatological deliverance that it prophetically foreshadows and which its memorial both invokes and awaits. Geoffrey Wainwright draws attention to the eschatological and messianic expectation associated with the Passover, and argues that within the church the 'messianic

[9] N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 559.

eschatological expectation' of Israel was 'transposed to the *return* of Christ.'[10]

This combination of historical memory and eschatological hope in the celebration of the Eucharist—the Christian Passover—is exhibited at various points in 1 Corinthians 11. The explicit reference to the anticipated coming of our Lord in verse 26 is one example of this. However, in the verses that follow this, it seems clear that the Eucharist functioned as a sort of proleptic judgment, an advance testing of the Church before the universal judgment to come at Christ's great and final advent. It also was a reality-filled promise of the joyful feast of the coming kingdom.

Although not uncommonly practiced as such, the Eucharistic memorial was never a commemoration of a closed event, like an effigy-bearing lid of a sarcophagus, a lifeless likeness from an unretrievable past. The memorialized death is the death of the risen One, the memorialization the same action in which he revealed himself to two amazed disciples at a meal in Emmaus after his resurrection (Luke 24:30-31).

This Maundy Thursday, when our attention is drawn back, once again, to the events and words of that upper room, let us discover there a living past, and actions that still propel and orient our time. The memorial that Christ instituted there continues to establish the steady rhythm of God's time in our world, to evoke and anticipate his

[10] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (London: Epworth Press, 1971), 23.

promised future, and make present the power of his past covenant-establishing action.

In maintaining a faithful Christian presence in the political realities of this age, few things are more important than living and acting in God's good time, being people who find their life in the living memory of a sustaining past, who patiently wait in hope for a promised future, and who are kept in the present through faith in the daily mercies of One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The decaying of Christian political witness often arises precisely from our ceding of the control of time to other, hostile, powers, from our submission to their fallen rhythms, our abandonment of memory, and our despairing of future hope. The memorial given to the Church on that Maundy Thursday—that great Last Supper, that great *first* Supper—keeps us in time, in time with God, in God's time, and in times hostile to him.

The Politics of Sacrifice

Exodus 12:1-14

The nation of Israel was founded upon an act of sacrifice.

Even after nine judgments—three cycles of three—had fallen upon the land of Egypt, Pharaoh still refused to relent and let the Israelites go. Before our text, Moses announced one final judgment yet to come: the death of the firstborn. Between the record of this declaration and the event of the judgment, we read of the institution of the Passover.

The observance of the Passover and the death of the Egyptian firstborn should be held in the closest of relations, two sides of a single event. The outcome of the conflict between YHWH and Pharaoh was to be the deliverance of Israel, YHWH's firstborn son, and the death of Pharaoh's firstborn (cf. Exodus 4:22-23). On account of Pharaoh's resistance, YHWH claimed all of the firstborn sons in the land of Egypt, either in judgment or by setting them apart through redemption (cf. Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16; Numbers 3:13). As in the divine provision of a ram as a substitute for Isaac, YHWH provided redemption for the sons, who then came to embody YHWH's claim upon the nation, itself spoken of as

YHWH's firstborn (Exodus 4:22). As Numbers 3:13 declares, 'all the firstborn are mine; when I killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both human and animal; they shall be mine.' In the sacrificial event of the Passover, the firstborn sons of Israel, standing as representatives of the whole nation—a role that will later pass to the Levites—are claimed as God's special possession, a position of both privilege and danger.

Exodus 12:1 begins with a temporal disjunction, framing the institution of the Passover as a retrospective interruption in the narrative—'The Lord said … in the land of Egypt.' Within the immediate context of the Exodus narrative, it would also seem as though the institution of the Passover must occur before the events that immediately precede it in the text. Further to this, rather than giving us an account of the actual celebration of the Passover, the observance of the Egyptian Passover is expressed in the briefest terms possible (v.28), while detailed attention is given to its *institution*. Chapters 12 and 13 of Exodus are concerned, less with a historical narrative of Exodus from Egypt, than with the liturgical and ritual memorialization and institution of this event. The 'time' of the Passover is dislodged from the pure linearity of historical narrative to be shared with those 'throughout Israel's generations' who observe the meal.

The Exodus begins the time of the nation, both in its history and yearly cycle—'This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.' It also is the event at the heart of Israel's time, the celebration that constitutes Israel in the

dynamic space between its originary past and its eschatological future.

Various myths have been forged to account for the foundation of nations, not only in stories such as those of Romulus and Remus, but also in the famous myths of political philosophy, such as those offered by Hobbes and Locke. Although it might easily go unrecognized in this respect, the narrative of the Passover should be read as another such national foundation myth. It is through the Passover that Israel is constituted as a nation and from it Israel derives its fundamental meaning.

Reading it in such a manner proves instructive: Israel achieves its foundation, not through a contract or compact between its members to ameliorate a violent or uncertain state of nature, but through the divinely instituted ritual of a sacrificial meal within a crucible of apocalyptic judgment. Through this event, the nation of Israel, celebrating in its constituent families, is established as the bearer of a divine meaning—as the firstborn son of YHWH (themes of birth pervade the first half of the book of Exodus).

In *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, Paul Kahn observes the blindness of liberalism to the constitutive role played by sacrifice in the establishment of the state. Liberalism's assumption of a contractarian basis for the state dulls our awareness to the manner in which our politics continue to be shot through with principles of sacrifice, faith, and love. The state presents itself as worthy of sacrifice, as the bearer of an ultimate meaning, worth dying and even killing for. On account of liberalism's thrall to reason, it has neglected the importance of the will and thereby

failed to recognize some of the most powerful forces that animate its own political communities.

In the Passover, the sacrificial basis of political community is disclosed. The legal constitution of the Torah, given later in the Exodus narrative, is established on this sacrificial foundation—'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt' (Exodus 20:2). The nation is established through the dedication of its firstborn sons to YHWH and through its annual memorialization of its origins in the sacrificial Passover meal. In the gospels, Jesus institutes his Supper in the context of the celebration of the Passover, establishing the foundation of the new political community of the Church through the meal memorializing his sacrifice as the firstborn Son.

Uncovering the sacrificial and erotic foundations of the sovereignty of the liberal nation state is an essential task of our political theologies. We must trace the forms of sacrifice that are embedded and instituted in our societies. We need to recognize, expose, and challenge, for instance, the role that the practice of war plays in the sacrificial economy of the state and the idolatrous ways in which political communities can come to claim our ultimate loyalties.

We will be equipped in this hermeneutical and prophetic task as we are grounded in the sacrificial practices of political communities in which we commit ourselves to an ultimate Good that relativizes the lesser goods secured by the nation state. As in Israel's Passover celebration, the sacramental economy of the Church ritually enacts the sacrificial basis of a community that is

founded upon divine initiative and redemption, leading to devotion to God over all other sovereigns. Within this new sacrificial politics any one of us may be called to die a martyr for Christ.

The Politics of Extraordinary Ordinariness

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Deuteronomy 4 is the bridge between the historical prologue of the opening three chapters of the book and Moses' declaration of the law beginning in the chapter that follows. Richard Nelson observes that, together with verses 32-40, the initial eight verses of the chapter bracket 'three paragraphs beginning with "be careful lest": vv.9-14, 15-22, and 23-31.'[11] The chapter charges the Israelites to do the law and to refrain from the fashioning of idols, and warns them of the dangers of choosing a different path.

The chapter's opening 'so now' challenges the Israelites, in light of their reflection upon the narrative of their wanderings and initial victories recounted in the preceding chapters, to ready themselves for the promulgation of the law that will follow. The alerting of the addressees to the specificity of their temporal situation is also seen in repeated references to 'today' or 'this day'

[11] Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 63.

(verses 4, 8, 20, 38-40). The Israelites stand at a pivotal and crucial moment: YHWH is presenting them the opportunity to establish a break with their previous wandering and the resources to start anew in a blessed land, if they will only grasp it. As they prepare to enter into the land promised to them by YHWH, Israel is charged to obey the 'statutes and ordinances' that Moses sets out before them. The importance of the law for Israel's continued existence in the land is underlined within the verses that follow. At stake is both their life itself and their possession of the land (verse 1).

Moses' purpose is to *teach* them the law: not merely to list its bare precepts, but to give Israel a sense of what keeping them will look like. While the Ten Commandments might be the central body of the law (verse 13), these commandments sketch the contours of what is unpacked in more detail in illustrative case law. There is no comprehensive legal system provided, but rather the pattern and manner of justice is set out in broad principles and specific examples.

The law set before Israel is an unusual body of material, establishing a regulation of Israel's life as a people that involves considerably more than merely public judicial administration of justice. The Ten Commandments contain a commandment against covetousness and there are several other such commandments that could never be enforced by any institutional organ of justice. At various points the law gestures away from human authorities to its deeper grounding in divine justice, a grounding that establishes the basis for God's blessing or cursing Israel as a nation,

guaranteeing the force of the law when it is otherwise rejected in practice. The pedagogy of the law is intensive and extensive, overcoming any division between public and private realms to take root in the familial life of the people: they must teach these statutes and ordinances to their children as they recount YHWH's deliverance of them from Egypt and his revelation to them at Horeb. The law is the charter of Israel's existence as a people and observing, meditating upon, and passing on this law are nothing less than the principles of Israel's continued life in the land.

Perhaps the most striking statements in our section of Deuteronomy 4 are found in verses 6-8. On a number of occasions in Deuteronomy Israel's relative smallness and insignificance as a nation is highlighted and it is contrasted with the much greater and mightier peoples that surround it (e.g. 4:38; 7:7; 9:1; 11:23). In verses 6-8, however, Moses presents a threefold argument that the law is the means by which Israel will be established as a 'great nation' in reputation among its neighbours, an argument that thereby serves as a threefold rationale for obedience.

The first argument (verse 6) is that obedience to the law will lead Israel to be praised and honoured by its neighbours for its wisdom. The admiration typically extended to the wise and discerning ruler would be shown to Israel as an entire people. The affinity between law and wisdom here is striking, occurring as it does outside of the Wisdom literature.

The second argument (verse 7) is that Israel's observance of the law would serve as a demonstration of

the nearness of YHWH to them, a nearness far greater than any of the gods and idols of the nations could offer. The law was a divine gift, an enduring symbol and memorial of YHWH's coming near to Israel at Horeb. The law, as it was designed to establish the terms of life in communion with YHWH, was both founded in God's proximity to Israel and established the enduring conditions for the enjoyment of a state where YHWH was near to Israel whenever they called upon him. The intensity and extensity of the law allowed for the kneading of the principles of life in fellowship with YHWH into every aspect of Israel's life as a people.

The final argument (verse 8) concerns the inherent equity of the law. The law was given as a sign of liberation into service of YHWH and its law serve to bring that liberation into all of Israel's social relations, with the poor, orphans and widows, strangers, debtors, and slaves.

Within Deuteronomy, much of the focus is upon preparation for war in the land and the relationship with other nations is routinely presented in terms of conflict and opposition. Israel's place as a nation among other nations will be established by driving out the nations currently inhabiting the land promised to it. Here, however, Israel's place among the nations is framed differently. Israel's renown among the nations will be secured, not by violent conquest and military might, but by dedicated observance of the principles of righteous life in close fellowship with God before the gaze of the peoples surrounding it.

In Moses' message to Israel, he declares that its international reputation and influence would be

established as it showcased the righteous, wise, and enlightening principles of the law of fellowship with YHWH, a God who was close to his people. The nations will be converted to the way of YHWH and his law as they see it manifested—incarnated—in the life of Israel. As Telford Work remarks, 'Israel's obedience is life-giving as well as life-keeping.'[12]

In the West today, the Church often regards its political task chiefly in terms of direct 'prophetic' address to the powers or in terms of 'culture war'. Although the frequently confrontational and oppositional cast of our political theology can often be bracing, it can no less often involve a dangerous neglect of our primary political task, which is that of being a 'city set on a hill' (Matthew 5:14), showcasing the goodness, wisdom, and righteousness of life in fellowship with God, portraying a form of life that is both compelling and convicting to all surrounding us. Sadly we have often abandoned our principal task of being an illuminating and inviting lamp, preferring the dazzling 'prophetic' spotlight or the weaponized laser beam for culture warfare.

Reading the New Testament epistles, a recurring emphasis is placed upon the duty of churches, their leaders, and their members to be held in good reputation by those in the societies that surround them, leaving even the most firm opponents without anything evil to say of them. These passages can often be an embarrassment both to those who emphasize prophetic activism and

[12] Telford Work, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 61.

those who emphasize political conflict, focusing as they do upon the virtues of lives that are characterized by submissiveness to authorities, peacefulness, gentleness, humility, and minding our own business. Christians are to be those who are quietly extraordinary in their behaviour in the most ordinary things of life. It is in so doing that, like Israel, we will fulfil the main part of our political duty as the people of God.

The Politics of Hannah's Opened Womb

1 Samuel 1:4-20; 2:1-10

Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film, *Children of Men*, depicts a human race which has been inexplicably infertile for a couple of decades; hope has failed and humanity stumbles towards the yawning grave. When women's wombs die, the world becomes a mausoleum, its lingering living occupants but fleeting shadows surrendering to the engulfing pitch of Night. In *Children of Men*, the miraculous birth of a child provides a flickering hope for humanity, the possibility of a new beginning.

Such a world is reminiscent in certain respects of the world of Israel that is described at the opening of the book of 1 Samuel. Israel languishes under wicked and spiritually dull rulers. In a threefold parallelism, we are informed the word of the Lord was not heard in those days (3:1); that Eli, the high priest, was losing his sight (3:2; cf. 4:15); and that the lamp of God will soon be extinguished (3:3). This is a world without light—without the light of revelation and prophetic vision, without the light of both spiritual and physical perception, and

without the symbolic light of God's presence. What little light remains is guttering and about to be snuffed out, as the world of the tabernacle will fall back into a dark and formless state. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas—in stark contrast to his namesake who stood against apostasy in Numbers 25—are wicked and corrupt priests, who despise the offering of the Lord (2:12-17) and violate the women at the tabernacle door, the virgins who were to represent Israel's holiness as the Lord's betrothed bride. Eli himself is very old and the woman, Hannah, with whom the story begins, has a closed womb and is sorely provoked by her fruitful counterpart, Peninnah. The story is thus framed in terms of themes of hopelessness, social decay, corrupt power, and bitter struggle with oppressive and ascendant rivals.

During their yearly visit to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice, Hannah leaves the festivities in order to cry out to the Lord at the tabernacle, weeping in her anguish. She vows to the Lord that, if he gives her a son, she will dedicate him to the Lord's service as a lifelong Nazirite (like Samson and, later, John the Baptist, also both children of formerly barren women).

Strikingly, Eli mistakes the fasting Hannah's 'pouring out of her soul' (v.16) to the Lord for drunkenness, displaying his lack of spiritual perception. Elsewhere in Scripture, drunkenness is a motif that appears in contexts of divine reversal and Eli's misperception may be an intimation of the greater stirrings that are afoot at the beginning of 1 Samuel. The wicked, with dulled perception and judgment on account of their intoxication (Isaiah 28:7-8), are made to reel with God's terrible cup of

wrath. Later in 1 Samuel, Eli will topple off his seat of judgment (4:18), like a drunk man losing his balance. The words of the righteous will also appear like drunken speech to the wicked: the Lord speaks to his people in a stammering foreign tongue, which will fall like the slurred babblings of a drunkard upon their insensitive ears (28:11). Luke may allude to Eli's mistaking of Hannah's prayer at the tabernacle for drunken speech when he describes the misrecognition of the tongues-speaking of the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:13).

The Lord 'remembers' Hannah (v.19) and grants her request, opening her womb and giving her a son whom she names Samuel. The manner in which the story of 1 Samuel begins with a woman struggling to give birth recalls the story of the Exodus and also provides a model for Luke in the writing of his gospel. Rather than focusing upon the corridors of power, the first moves of God's great national and cosmic purposes in history appear in the unwitnessed intimacy of domestic and personal struggles and in the persevering faith of obscure people without political power or public influence.

And especial attention is given to women in these contexts. The struggle of childbearing and rearing is not consigned to a largely sentimental 'private' realm, but is rendered integral to the great drama of salvation history. The stories of the matriarchs of Israel and of women such as Ruth and Hannah are not romanticized—they are stories with much suffering and oppression—but they are stories of persevering and overcoming faith in dark places, and of quiet and unsung victories whose fruit will one day erupt into public consciousness.

They are also stories of unrecognized turning points in the tide of history, not least because God is a God who remembers and who attends to the people that others may ignore. God answers the prayers provoked by the personal struggles of faithful women such as Hannah in a manner that effects more public and radical social turnarounds through them. The many biblical accounts of women struggling to give birth and being answered by God casts childbearing as a profoundly active calling requiring stubborn and persevering faith. The frequency and prominence of such accounts—and their priority in books such as Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, 1 Samuel, and Luke—also makes clear that, despite the hiddenness of their labour, God regards and honours these women as prominent actors on the stage of his history and never disconnects the dramatic socio-political harvest of his purpose from their unseen work in sowing and nurturing its seeds.

This relationship is powerfully seen in Hannah's prayer of rejoicing—which provides the pattern for Mary's Magnificat in Luke (Luke 1:46-55)—with its startling association of the reversal of the spiritual and political fortunes of the nation with God's answer to the prayers of an unknown woman for a child. Hannah recognizes that the birth of Samuel heralded more than her own vindication against Penninah: it was a sign that the Lord was about to turn Israel upside-down, throwing down the oppressive rich and mighty and raising up the weak and the poor. She praises the Lord that he is about to tear down the corrupt house of Israel and re-establish it again upon righteous foundations.

While the connection between the quiet and private victories of obscure individuals and the grand turnarounds in history are generally only seen in retrospect—on the rare occasions when they *are* seen—faithful Hannah is able to recognize in God's answer to her distress the faintest foreshock of forthcoming seismic events in Israel's history. In God's gift of life to her dead womb, Hannah recognizes the working of a resurrection power—'*the Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up*'—that cannot but lead to radical social upheaval in the future.

As political theologians we may be peculiarly vulnerable to the error of neglecting—or even denying—the significance of the obscure and personal struggles and victories of the faithful that do not assert themselves onto the grand public stage of society. When our eyes scan for the signs of social and political reversal, we wouldn't attend to the agonized prayers of a barren woman. Like Eli, the high priest who lacked spiritual perception, we may fail to recognize the importance of people and actions we have grown accustomed to ignoring. We can give people the false message that the capacity to make great social and political difference is the preserve of rich and prominent public figures, denying the value, necessity, and potential of quiet and private callings, pressing people into worldly moulds of influence. As we serve a God who attends to the weak and vulnerable and remembers the forgotten and ignored, the greatest social earthquakes can find their unseen epicentres in the most unexpected of places.

The Politics of the Death of the Nation's Beloved

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

David's reaction to the news of the death of Saul may surprise some readers of First Samuel, in which Saul mercilessly pursues David and seeks his life. Rather than rejoicing at Saul's comeuppance, or expressing relief at the removal of his adversary, David pours out his heart in lament over the loss of Israel's king. Within David's expression of distress over the death of Saul and Jonathan some profound yet underappreciated truths about the character of political leadership is exposed.

David's song of lament is entitled 'the Song of the Bow' (verse 18). This suggests a particular emphasis upon the death of Jonathan, who is associated with the bow as a weapon both within the song (verse 22) and within the narrative of Samuel more broadly (1 Samuel 18:4; 20:17-40). Indeed, as we look at the song more closely, this accent upon lamenting the death of Jonathan may be borne out in its structure and content.

Peter Leithart observes that verses 19-25 of the song form a chiasm:[13]

A—glory/beauty/gazelle slain; mighty fallen, v.19
B—Daughters of Philistia do not rejoice: no offerings to Dagon, v.20
C—Fallen shield, v.21
C'—Bow and sword in life, v.22-23
B'—Daughters of Israel, weep: contrast to the Philistine women, v.24
A'—Mighty fallen; Jonathan slain on heights, v.25

The parallel between verse 19 and verse 25 might suggest that Jonathan is the glory, beauty, or 'gazelle' of Israel that David speaks of as slain upon the high places. Jonathan is the fleet-footed warrior (cf. verse 23), like Asahel in the chapter that follows (2:18). The swift gazelle leaping and skipping in the mountains appears as a romantic image for the Beloved in the Song of Solomon (2:8-9a):

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle

[13] Peter Leithart, *A Son To Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 164-165

or a young stag.

The image of the gazelle reappears in 2:17 and also in the concluding lines of the song (8:14). Jonathan is Israel's gazelle, the beloved of the people and their glory. His death robs Israel of its bridegroom and favourite son.

David is concerned that the deaths of Saul and Jonathan will be cause for rejoicing among the Philistines. He calls upon the land itself to mourn with him over the fallen Saul and Jonathan–'*You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!*'–who, like strong lions and swift eagles, were jewels crowning its mountains.

The weapons of Saul and Jonathan—the bow, the sword, and the shield—metonymically relate to Saul and Jonathan themselves: Jonathan is the bow and Saul is the sword and the fallen anointed shield (verses 21-22). David's song concludes with the declaration that the 'weapons of war perished.' Leithart observes: 'The Lord's anointed king *is* the shield for his people. Jonathan and Saul not only had weapons but *were* weapons, but now they lie unused and useless on the heights of Gilboa.'[14] Sacrificial themes also play beneath the surface of the song: Jonathan and Saul offer up blood and fat (verse 22) and they are slain on the 'high places'. Gilboa is called upon not to provide 'fields of offerings' (verse 21).

Throughout the song, David refers to Saul and Jonathan in a way that presents them as romantic figures. Their physicality and virility are prominent throughout:

[14] *Ibid.* 164

they are described as possessing the strength and speed of majestic animals, identified with the action of their weapons, and described as beloved and pleasant. While David wishes that the daughters of Philistia would not rejoice at Saul and Jonathan's demise, he calls upon the daughters of Israel to weep over Saul. Saul is like a father or a bridegroom to the daughters of Israel, who dresses them in the finest apparel.

The song does not end with the conclusion of the chiasm. David's personal grief at the death of his friend Jonathan overflows into a heart-wrenching declaration of the love between them. Jonathan, although about thirty years David's senior and the crown prince of Israel, had symbolically handed over his status to David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), been loyal to David to the point of risking his life, and had saved David from death (1 Samuel 20).[15] Jonathan's love for David was remarkable: he had demonstrated a devotion to David far beyond any woman.

David's song reveals some of the deeper dynamics of political leadership. The leadership described in his song is romantic and erotic; the relationship between the king and his son and their people is shot through with love and desire. Israel's beloved gazelle, Jonathan, has perished on the high places and her daughters mourn the loss of the king who dressed them for marriage. A land filled

[15] The age difference between David and Jonathan can roughly be guessed at from the fact that Jonathan was already active as a military commander early in Saul's reign (1 Samuel 13:1-2).

with the burgeoning life of awakened love now falls into the barrenness of mourning.

Romantic and erotic themes are present throughout the narrative of Samuel and the early kingdom. Leaders are noted for their arresting physical appearance and by the desire and love that they provoke. Saul is head and shoulders above all of the people, more handsome than any other in Israel (1 Samuel 9:2). David is ruddy, bright-eyed, and good-looking (1 Samuel 16:12, 18). Solomon's physical appearance is a prominent theme within his song. The king is the lover, the bridegroom, the husband of his people—a theme that is powerfully illustrated by the Song of Solomon. Around these figures cluster all of the ingredients of great romance: tales of derring-do, the composition and playing of music, a fecundity of poetic imagery, and the affection and attention of young women.

David and Solomon are the archetypal kings, not on account of military might or prowess, but because they are the great lovers of Israel. David's story is one of power gained through the winning of people's love. Saul loved him (1 Samuel 16:21); Jonathan loved him (18:1-4); the women of Israel loved him (18:6-7); Michal, Saul's daughter, loved him (18:28); all of Israel and Judah loved him (18:16). David—whose name means 'beloved'—is loved by God and expresses a deep love in return. As Augustine once observed, "*Cantare amantis est*" (Sermon 336): it is the lover who sings and David is the sweet singer of Israel, the one in whom Israel's devotion to YHWH bursts forth into the joy of song.

The friendship between David and Jonathan reflects David's gaining of power through love.[16] The story of their love begins with the young David being taken from his father's house and brought into the house of Saul, much as a bride would be (1 Samuel 18:2), and as Jonathan initiates a covenant with him. David's attractive appearance—ruddy, and bright-eyed—is not the arresting masculinity of Saul's great stature and physique, but a softer, more feminine one. However, after stripping himself of the garments that displayed his royal masculine status and giving them to David, Jonathan, who formerly distinguished himself as a man on the battlefield, stays at home, is paralleled with Michal (1 Samuel 18:28; 19:1), is cast as a 'mama's boy' (1 Samuel 20:30), and becomes more dependent upon David in emotional and material ways. Meanwhile, the text masculinizes David, who goes out and fights in the most virile fashion, obtaining two hundred foreskins from the Philistines. Yaron Peleg observes that the literary portrayal of David and Jonathan's relationship in gendered imagery serves the purpose of highlighting the *political* reversal whereby David is established as husband and father for the nation in Jonathan's place.[17]

Within David's song of lament, we witness the romance and *eros* of political leadership. This romantic political lament is not without modern parallel. Jackie

[16] The following remarks draw heavily upon the work of Yaron Peleg, 'Love at First Sight? David, Jonathan, and the Politics of Gender,' JSOT 30:2, 171-189.
[17] *Ibid*. 189

Kennedy's appropriation of the line from the musical, 'Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot' describes one such tragic modern political romance in a manner redolent of David's lament. Though it often evades our analysis, contemporary politics is suffused with such *eros* and romance. The countless dollars expended on political advertising and the careful cultivation of image are designed, not principally to *inform* the public, but to evoke their love and desire. We vote for our leaders, not merely for their policies and competence, but for their charm, charisma, personal magnetism, likeability, virility or attractiveness, and other such factors. We attend to their physicality, to their personal 'presence', and to their image. Incumbencies can play out like love affairs, with a 'honeymoon period' followed by a cooling of affections.

The book of Samuel's unembarrassed treatment of the dimensions of romance and eros in its account of political rule may provoke our enlightened judgment, leery as we are of the superficiality of 'image-based' politics. We may appeal to YHWH's example of looking beyond the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7), searching for virtues such as economic prudence, political intelligence, and the like. Yet the rest of the text of the book of Samuel suggests that, in choosing a leader, God looked primarily for a fitting *lover* for his people and that even though the appearance of such a person wasn't *sufficient* to fit them for rule, it wasn't unimportant either. Perhaps in our pretensions to a rationality that exceeds the *eros* of politics we leave ourselves unprepared to reckon with its necessary

presence and hence more vulnerable to its vicissitudes. Reflection upon the 'erotic' politics of Samuel may prove salutary, alerting us to its continuing power and importance in our own day.

The Politics of the King's Shepherd

Psalm 23:1-6

Of all of the biblical psalms, perhaps Psalm 23 is the most familiar. I memorized this psalm as a child of approximately three years of age. Its words now move upon my lips with a sort of muscle memory born of much silent repetition, recalling me to the truth of God's loving providential concern for me. Words that are so deeply sedimented in our consciousness are easily dulled to us on account of such familiarity, yet these words can still stir, revealing surprising truths that had hitherto crossed the threshold of our mouths unrecognized.

John Goldingay suggests the possibility that the opening line of the psalm, rather than being principally a statement about YHWH, is a claim that the psalmist is making about *himself*: *'My shepherd is YHWH.'*[18] Read in such a manner, the psalm comes into sharper relief as a powerful declaration of the speaker's own confidence and trust in YHWH—it responds to the implicit question 'who

[18] John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) 348.

is *your* shepherd?' In contrast to the various other gods, rulers, or resources that other people may trust to shepherd them through life's dangerous times, the psalmist's trust is in YHWH.

Within the contemporary English culture to which I belong, shepherding typically summons peaceful and bucolic scenes of rolling hills, dry stone walls, and beautiful Lakeland countryside to our minds. Such cultural impressions of shepherding sharply contrast with scriptural representations of it. In Scripture, the shepherd is a figure who is associated with authority and violence, and the task of shepherding is one beset by dangers on every side. The shepherd must drive away or kill predators, bandits, thieves, and navigate hostile terrain. The Good Shepherd suffers violent death for the sake of his flock. Shepherding was often strongly associated with rulers and the gods. As Goldingay observes: 'The shepherd is the sovereign lord, the sheep is the vassal; it is not a cozy image.'[19] The picture of YHWH that the psalm suggests is one of 'fierce tenderness,' a God who powerfully protects us from assaults and provides for us in our dependency.[20]

Within the opening verses the psalmist speaks of YHWH's rich and bountiful provision, painting an idyllic scene of verdant pasturage and restful waters. The psalmist is revived through YHWH's care. He is led in 'faithful paths', by a divine shepherd whose complete

[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.* 354

commitment to the psalmist's well-being is grounded in his very word and character–*'for his name's sake.'*[21]

As the psalm moves away from the peaceful scenes with which it opens, the psalmist speaks of his absolute assurance of safety even in a valley overshadowed by death, a place where destruction and the grave are close at hand. YHWH's presence with him saves him from fear. In particular, the psalmist's comfort is drawn from the shepherd's rod for subduing or driving away his flock's enemies and the shepherd's staff, which the shepherd would both lean upon and use as a means for keeping the sheep in line. Once again, these images should not be sentimentalized. The psalmist is not speaking merely of an emotionally registered nearness, but of his comfort in knowing that YHWH is *actively* present in his situation, guiding him and frustrating all of the threats of those who seek his destruction.

The concluding verses of the psalm return to the theme of YHWH's provision, albeit now with the psalmist's enemies included within the scene. YHWH affords rich succor to the psalmist in his extremities. Even when he is surrounded on all sides by his enemies in battle, YHWH 'arrays' a feasting table for the psalmist. Anointed with oil and having wine poured into his cup until it runs over, the psalmist enjoys the bounty, prosperity, enlargement, and rest associated with peace even in the midst of war. Rather than being pursued by his enemies, it will be YHWH's goodness and mercy that never cease to follow hot on his heels. YHWH's temple

[21] *Ibid.* 350

and presence will be the place he knows as his home, as an honoured recipient of YHWH's hospitality, liberality, and protection.

The image of shepherding plays an important role in Israel's history and sense of identity. The patriarchs were shepherds. Israel was led like a flock through the wilderness in the Exodus, with the shepherd Moses striking their enemies with the rod (cf. Isaiah 63:11-13). The great king David, the psalmist to whom this psalm is attributed, was called from looking after sheep to become the leader of YHWH's people (1 Chronicles 17:7).

And here we encounter another dimension of the psalm that is often neglected: this is a psalm attributed to the anointed leader of YHWH's people. While we are (rightly) accustomed to singing or praying this psalm as a private expression of God's goodness and our trust in him as individuals, there is a political dimension to it that should not be missed. The psalmist to whom the psalm is attributed is not a private individual, but the representative of his people, blessed with a kingdom by YHWH, yet assaulted by enemy forces seeking his destruction.

2 Chronicles 7:6 refers to David giving praise by the hand of the Levites, singing, as it were, the 'King's Song'.[22] In the Old Testament, the ruler of the people often led the nation in its worship on important occasions. In psalms associated with the king, the people are invited to join in the worship of the representative in

[22] Peter Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003) 112.

whom they are summed up, to locate themselves within the life of their leader, and to find his experience resonating with their own.

The fact that the king, himself regarded as the shepherd of his people, would look to YHWH in his fraught military and political situation as a weak sheep looks to its shepherd is a striking image of dependency. Comparing this with our own political leaders, who typically project a public image of confident assurance in their own sufficiency before the struggles and dangers facing our nations, the contrast is noteworthy.

Although some might be inclined to restrict the applicability of a theology of God as the shepherd of a nation and its rulers to the *sui generis* situation of Israel under the old covenant, this theological image is taken up in the New Testament and applied more broadly. In Matthew 25:32, Jesus gathers and divides the nations like a shepherd separating sheep from goats. In Revelation 2:26-27, Christ promises his faithful people that they will be given to share in his role of shepherding the nations with a rod of iron.

Appropriately leery though we may be of Constantinian excesses, it seems to me that, provided that necessary caution was taken, the New Testament writers would have regarded it as amply fitting for Gentile rulers to utter the words of such a psalm as the representatives of their peoples. Such public and political affirmations of rulers' reliance upon and submission to the shepherding hand of God would have been the appropriate response to the Lordship of Christ, and of their understanding of their passing role relative to his eternal kingdom. As

Oliver O'Donovan observes, such obedience of the nations can be a sign that God has blessed the Church's mission.[23]

Whether or not our rulers or nations publicly acknowledge or submit to the rule of Christ, this psalm offers us an enlightening perspective upon them, alerting us to their vulnerability and weakness, as sheep in need of a shepherd. Our very halls of power should be recognized as sites of radical dependency. When we pray for our nations and rulers, we are often insufficiently alert to this. We can pray for them as powerful agents, while failing to reflect upon their profound vulnerability and reliance upon divine providence and protection.

[23] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 195.

The Politics of Wisdom and Folly

Proverbs 8:14, 22-31

To many readers, the book of Proverbs may appear to be a grab bag of wise sayings, lacking coherence, unifying theme, or overarching structure. Each pithy proverb stands alone, with little more than a nodding acquaintance with those surrounding it. However, closer examination reveals the presence of an image that dominates and frames the entire book, seen in the personification of Wisdom.

Much of the book of Proverbs is presented as the teaching of Solomon, especially directed to a royal son, instructing him to cleave fast to the lessons taught to him by his mother and father. The character of the addressee of the book should alert us to the fact that the wisdom being spoken of is necessarily a political wisdom, a wisdom for rule.

Within the book of Proverbs two thematic threads are closely interwoven: the youth's relationship with wisdom and the young man's search for a woman. The quest of the young royal for understanding is narrated as if it were the search of the single man for love. This romantic quest is presented as a diptych, the youth caught between two

prospects—Wisdom and Folly—both vying for his affections.

Wisdom calls out aloud in the bustling thoroughfares, in the thronged squares, at the gates, on the high hill, and on the elevated places (1:20-23; 8:1-11; 9:3-6). Her appeal is public and directed to all.

She is to be found in the places of commerce, social interaction, and rule, addressing herself to the civic and political life of the people. Like the king who prepared the wedding feast in Jesus' parable, she sends out her maidens and invites people to partake of her bounty, to eat of her bread and drink of her wine (9:4-5).

Wisdom is the one by whom kings reign, rulers judge, and princes rule (8:15-16). Her words are plain and not hidden, straightforward and not perverse. The father and mother direct their son to pursue, heed, hold fast to, and love Wisdom (4:3-13): she will be his source of life and wellbeing. Those who seek Wisdom diligently will find her and receive life by her.

Alongside this figure of Wisdom stands Folly. Folly, described in chapter 9 and related to the seductress of chapters 5 and 7, bears a superficial resemblance to Wisdom. She, too, is to be found on the street and she also invites the young men to her house. However, her words are enticing and perverse, laced with flattery, and her ways treacherous.

Promising the delights of secret and forbidden pleasures, she quietly leads men astray in the dimness of the gloaming, picking them off individually and furtively, drawing them away from the openness of the public

square, to the dark and uneven back alleys in the night, and finally to their doom.

The personification of Folly is clearest in chapter 9:13-18, where she mimics many of the actions of Wisdom and exactly echoes her words from earlier in that same chapter: 'You who are simple, turn in here!' Like Wisdom, she offers all who hear her food and drink, yet, where Wisdom gives her guests her bread and wine, Folly offers stolen water and bread 'eaten in secret' (v.17), the forbidden character of her meal underlying its appeal.

The way in which the seductress/Folly and Wisdom are set up side by side is deeply instructive, as it brings some key truths to light. The reader is brought to see in the seductress something more than merely an adulteress or prostitute, but an image of Folly—Wisdom's opposite—more generally. The reader is also made to relate the quest for Wisdom with the young man's quest for a wife in illuminating ways.

In light of this thematic interplay, it is quite fitting that the book of Proverbs should conclude in an acrostic extolling the virtuous wife—the 'woman of valour'—in language powerfully redolent of earlier descriptions of Wisdom (31:10, cf. 3:15, 8:11; v.15, cf. 9:2, 5; v.11, cf. 3:14; v.30, cf. 1:7). From *aleph* to *tav*, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is the complete woman, the resolving chord in whom the two central thematic explorations of the book most decisively combine.

The conceptual interplay between the pursuit of Wisdom and sexual faithfulness and continence is central for Proverbs. Both understanding and folly begin with the heart: folly with the love of error and hatred of reproof

(empowering Folly's weapon of flattery), but understanding with the love of wisdom (*philosophia*) and the pursuit of uprightness. Without a humble and faithful love for Wisdom, the greatest intelligence can be reduced to a factory of self-pleasing and self-deluding rationalizations.

A close conceptual relation between righteousness, faithfulness, and prudence in sexual relations and marital bonds and the pursuit of understanding and political wisdom is surprising and perhaps scandalous in the contemporary world, where the public realm of politics is considered hermetically sealed both from the sex lives of our leaders and of the electorate. Yet Proverbs controversially implies that these things can never be separated. Both rulers and voters who cannot faithfully direct and guard their loves and desires are compromised political actors.

The effect of royal consorts upon the hearts of kings is an ongoing theme in the Old Testament scriptures, whether for folly and evil, as in the case of Jezebel with Ahab, or for wisdom and good, as in the case of Esther with Ahasuerus. Developing the same theme from a different angle, in Wisdom of Solomon 8, Wisdom is depicted as a woman Solomon seeks from God to be his royal consort.

Here in Proverbs 8, as in Wisdom of Solomon, the female character of Wisdom is a personification (like other figures such as the Grim Reaper or Old Father Time), a noble daughter in whom God himself delights. God's creative rule in the world was established in and with Wisdom, who is at play within it.

As Wisdom's source is in God, she must be sought accordingly, the fear of the Lord being the necessary starting point. The consort of the righteous king, the queenly Wisdom will be known in the honourable playfulness of the faithful and loving royal union and will establish and make his house great. The king's determination to set his heart completely upon Wisdom is the foundation upon which all rests, the inner integrity of the ruler's faithful loving heart producing the broader integrity of the kingdom.

Proverbs' vision of the necessity and centrality of the well-ordered heart in faithful rule and of the inextricability of political wisdom and private desires may not sit easily with certain cultural convictions concerning the sacred privacy of people's wallets, bedrooms, and Internet histories.

However, regarding the politics of folly manifested in a figure such as Donald Trump, I am struck by the timeliness of this challenge. Donald Trump epitomizes the permissiveness of and the centrality of entertainment in a decadent society, 'authenticity' of personality eclipsing integrity of character. His clear lack of probity, fidelity, honesty, and humility does little damage to him when these very vices serve to render him such a compelling figure in our entertainment media.

Likewise, accusations of dishonesty and unprincipled self-advancement increasingly barely dent politicians such as Hillary Clinton, from whom electorates largely expect such things.

The politics of folly is a form of politics that flatters us in our own lack of personal integrity, requiring no

humility or change of us. It celebrates and exemplifies that which is transgressive and permissive—'stolen water' and 'bread eaten in secret' (Proverbs 9:17). In figures like Trump we celebrate authenticity in vice over inconsistency in virtue. This form of politics is a farce performed before a cynical and demoralized public. It is a politics that is parasitic upon and intensifying of the moral decadence of an entertainment driven society.

Like the flatteries of the seductress, it leads down to the grave. When we no longer expect deep moral integrity of our leaders and even favour leaders who visibly lack such integrity on account of their entertaining transgressions and their exemplary permissiveness, we leave ourselves ever more exposed to the threat of politicians who cannot be held to either promise or principle.

Against such a form of politics stands the politics of Wisdom. This is a politics that begins in the loves and desires of the well-guarded heart. It is a politics that calls for personal humility, financial probity, marital fidelity, scrupulous honesty, and self-mastery of both politicians and the public. It is a politics that resists the lure of the transgressive and the permissive championed by our entertainment media.

Against the deadly apathy, cynicism, demoralization, and disillusionment encouraged by the politics of folly, the politics of Wisdom can be a politics of love and delight. The more principled and personally consistent we are in our commitment to that which is good, the more we are freed to rejoice in it.

'And now, my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.
Happy is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.
For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favour from the Lord;
but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death.'

The Politics of the Mist

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

'Vanity of vanities'—or, more literally translated, '*vapour of vapours*.'

There are few more potent and fecund metaphors for human life, activity, and thought than that of vapour, breath, or mist.

Life is like groping through a dense fog, which shrouds and veils reality, preventing us from seeing through to the heart of things. It is an experience of inscrutability: we can read neither the comings nor goings of being.

We can neither grasp nor control it. It slips through our fingers, eluding all of our attempts at mastery. It is fleeting and ephemeral. It leaves no trace or mark of its passing, but passes into nothing. It produces no lasting fruit nor gain, and has no permanent effects.

It is insubstantial, formed of nothing, and providing no bedrock for security against decay or change. Humanity's attempts to fashion and understand the world for itself will all ultimately founder, as the unforgiving wind of time whisks away our kingdoms of dust.

It is this metaphor that lies at the heart of the book of Ecclesiastes: Ecclesiastes declares the ultimate futility of all of our attempts at building and figuring out the world for ourselves, comparing these to attempts at 'shepherding the wind'. This is the character of life 'under the sun'. Life lived beneath the veil of heaven is inescapably vaporous.

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher is searching for some sort of 'profit'—some sort of lasting fruit or mark for his labours under the sun—but finds none. His attempts to find 'profit' through pleasure (2:1-11), wisdom (2:12-16) and work (2:17-23) all prove futile. Whatever he does will ultimately fall apart: no labours seem to have a lasting effect on the earth.

The vaporous character of the worlds that man seeks to create for himself stand in marked contrast to the fixity and permanence of the world in which he finds himself (1:3-11). It is this contrast between permanence and ephemerality that manifests his activities as vapour. We might try to form and fill our own world, much as God formed and filled his world, but his will last, while ours will soon perish.

In this week's lectionary reading, the political dimension of the vaporous character of human existence comes to the fore as the Teacher, traditionally identified with King Solomon, reflects upon the vaporous nature of his sovereignty and kingdom-building.

The Teacher sees his toil as king as chasing after wind and his kingdom as a vapour. Whatever rule he establishes must finally be entrusted to the hands of another, whose wisdom is far from guaranteed. Whatever

control we establish and enjoy is temporary and will one day be forfeited, our labour and all of its fruits being caught up upon the winds of time and scattered abroad.

This crisis of wisdom was exemplified in the history of Israel itself. The kingdom that achieved the zenith of its glory through the reign of the wise King Solomon was riven in twain through the proud foolishness of his son Rehoboam.

In times of apparent stability, when we are tempted to enumerate and rest assured in our political and social gains, it is easy to forget that all of this is vapour, which could vanish like a morning's mist. Our political labour must also be entrusted to uncertain hands, to persons who may abandon or destroy that to which we devoted our life's efforts.

The Teacher's message in these verses may strike a grim resonance in the hearts of many in contemporary Western politics. Whether it is American conservatives mourning the degradation of the Republican Party under the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump or European leaders scrambling to right the damaged and listing vessel of the EU following the broadside of the Brexit vote, many are currently experiencing the disorienting and tragic vaporousness of political realities and projects they have invested their lives in.

At such times we may be drawn to despair and a sense of the futility of our work, as the toil of generations evaporates before our eyes and we find ourselves powerless to arrest its disappearance. So often our lives are characterized by the frustration of trying to master or firmly lay hold of the vapour of our existence. Life

becomes fraught with the failure of our attempts to shepherd the wind and gain leverage over our world and existence within it. Setting a Sisyphean task for ourselves, we condemn ourselves to constant defeat.

So what is the solution? When we take the true measure and account of our existence, and recognize ourselves as vapour—indeed, as vapour of vapours—we are no longer so tempted to live by sight. As we abandon our attempts at mastery and absolute human providence, we can begin to learn to live in reliance upon and thankfulness for divine providence.

No longer seeking for fixity and security in the creation itself, we are enabled to recognize our radical dependency, to gratefully appreciate the creation and our temporal blessings within it as gifts that can no more be grasped and secured than our breath, but which constantly arrive as a gracious divine bestowal.

Rather than investing all of our hope in doomed quests for human mastery, we entrust ourselves and our frail works to the One who exists beyond the vapour. We can store up treasures with God in heaven, above the insubstantial and ephemeral realm we inhabit.

Even when our human plans, knowledge, and actions vanish into nothing, God will always remain secure. The vapour of our labours will shift and disperse, leaving no trace of its departed presence, yet God never changes. We can never succeed in shepherding the winds, yet God is the rushing Spirit who makes the clouds his chariot.

As we seek security in God by faith and in prayer, rather than living by human sight and placing our ultimate hope in our works, world, and wisdom, we are

freed to adopt a different posture towards our lives. While we continue to labour, we do so with a new sense of dependency and gratitude. The knowledge of God's good providence in the vapour can rescue us from the despair that can dog us and rekindle a flame of hope in those trapped in the sterility of a nostalgic regret.

The message of Ecclesiastes is surprisingly life-affirming. Since we cannot control or master life, we should learn to live joyfully, thankfully, and dependently, receiving it as a gift from God's hand, trusting him for eternal gain, and thanking him for the degree to which he establishes our works in time. We should allow ourselves to be dispossessed of our world, to receive the vapour anew with open and non-grasping hands. This is the way of true political wisdom and the surest way to restore hope in times of despair.

The Politics of the Child

Isaiah 9:1-7

In a passage associated with the period of the Syro-Ephraimite War (736-732BCE), whether during its midst or at its end, we are presented with a vision of the restored fortunes of the beleaguered nation of Judah. Over a land formerly shrouded in the darkness of war and its aftermath, a new dawn has risen and the birth of a child heralds a new age of national prosperity.

The scene for this passage is set by the previous chapter, within which a period of gloom and silence is described. During this period of silence, God's word is not heard. Held in suspense, the prophet and his disciples withdraw into a sort of hibernation, waiting for divine revelation to break the winter of the nation's suffering (8:16-18). Among their contemporaries, there would be those tempted to search out other forms of revelation, forms of revelation that would drive them into the deepest darkness (v.22).

Unlike those in the nation who pursued false gods and mediums, a glorious new dawn has come for those who waited for YHWH. In verses familiar from many Nativity plays and most memorably presented in Handel's

Messiah, the prophet declares that the people who walked in darkness had seen a great light. This new dawn arose in the very regions of northern Israel first annexed by Tiglath-Pileser III—Napthali and Zebulun. Expressed in a form akin to that of a thanksgiving hymn, the prophet's announcement of the reversal of Judah's circumstances is compared not only to a great dawn, but also to the joy of harvest and the celebrations that follow a decisive victory over an oppressor, the bringing in of a new era of peace.

The event that has led to this celebration is the birth of a child, a crown prince and an heir to the throne of David. Verses 6-7 may take a form related to that of a coronation ceremony, the names of verse 6—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—being the honorific titles given to the new ruler on such an occasion. The sign of David's heir is an auspicious indicator of the positive destiny for a formerly oppressed nation, a galvanization of its sovereignty and a promise of its enjoyment of peace in the years to come. This child is often identified with Hezekiah.

Themes of new birth are common within scriptural narratives. At key moments in the biblical narratives and the story of the people of YHWH, a new dawn is seen to arrive with the birth of a child through divine favour and promise, shattering the gloom of a former darkness and serving as a propitious sign of a future that breaks with the oppression of the past. This is most notably seen at the beginning of the book of Exodus, in 1 Samuel, and later, in the book of Luke. In each of these books, we see an emphasis upon the 'labour' of women and the manner

in which they and the children that they bear are the means by which a new hope arrives.

Such themes are scattered throughout the book of Isaiah, but perhaps most prominently in the two preceding chapters. In 7:14-16 and 8:1-4, newborn children serve as signs of divine favour and coming deliverance. The children of a nascent generation represent the horizon upon which the light of a glorious new day is beginning to break. Later on, in chapter 11, infants and young children are integral to Isaiah's vision of a promised era of miraculous peace, of a time when the little child leads lions, where nursing children play by the cobra's hole, and weaned children put their hands in vipers' dens (11:6-9). The frequency of metaphors of God's mother- and father-like care and provision for his people in the wider context of the book of Isaiah is worth noting, highlighting both the radical dependency and radical provision that are integral to many biblical visions of God's promised future.

The fragility of the purchase that the promise seems to have upon the future is well illustrated by the weakness, vulnerability, and dependence of an infant. The future that the child represents is still far off and many challenges and difficulties lie between the present and that distant prospect. The child, the embodiment of the nation's hopes, must be protected and nurtured for many years before the future that he stands for can ever be realized. God's gift of a child is both a foretaste of the promised future and a commitment to provide in the interim.

For many of us within the UK, the recent birth and christening of His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge was a very potent reminder of the power of a child to stand for a distant future and to draw a nation's attention to a time beyond that in which it finds itself. Like the first shaft of light of a coming day, the beginning of such a life in our midst invites us to reflect upon all of the possibilities, promise, and peril of a time where all that will remain of us is our legacy and memory. In this infant, in all of his vulnerability, we see a bridge between our time and one which is to come, a piece of us that will remain.

Children, on account of their power to disrupt the natural present-centeredness of our outlook, can be a profoundly potent force in shaping our political visions. Children awake us to the question of what we will leave behind when we are gone, bringing us to such things as the troubling awareness of the long-term damage that we are causing to our planet and the cost that our descendants will have to bear for our selfishness and irresponsible stewardship. Children can also serve as sources of hope, holding open the possibility of a future in which many of the hostilities, fears, and prejudices of our own age will be overcome, a closing of old chapters and a chance to start afresh.

The role of infants and young children as prophetic signs that we witness in the book of Isaiah is not without parallel in our own day and age. As in Isaiah's day, infants are like windows onto a time that offers new light and perspective upon and hope within our own. In their very weakness, children alert us to the precariousness of the

future itself. In their helplessness, they remind us both of our responsibility to them and of our own radical dependence upon God. As we see the vulnerability of our children in the face of the threat of the wolves, cobras, lions, and vipers of our world, we are spurred to commit ourselves with a greater zeal to the difficult task of patient peace-making, to a politics that exists for the sake of the weak and dependent among us.

For these and many other reasons, children are essential to the formation of a healthy political vision. A Christian politics is a politics within which we attend to the child that Jesus has brought into our midst. In regarding the sign of children we can accomplish an existential turn from a politics driven by the selfish interests of our own generation to one of responsibility and hope for the well-being of those to come.

For the Christian tradition, Isaiah 9:1-7 has been read as a text foretelling the coming of Christ. In the infant Jesus, the 'dayspring' of God has visited us, the one in whom the night and all of its shadows will finally dissolve into perfect day. Like Anna and Simeon in the temple in Luke 2, in the fragile and dependent infant Jesus, we are by faith to see the assurance of the fullness of God's future. In the vulnerable infancy of Jesus, we are also reminded of the committed parenthood of God, a God who will nurture and protect the seeds of a promised future until the time when, with the final arrival of his peaceable kingdom, the earth is filled with their rich fruit. A politics that operates in terms of this will find itself empowered with the profoundest of hopes and charged with the greatest of responsibilities.

The Politics of God's Plenty

Isaiah 55:1-5

These verses present a dramatic divine reversal of Israel's fortunes. In chapter 8, the nation rejected the soft-flowing waters of Shiloah and God sent the overflowing waters of Assyrian judgment—symbolized by the mighty Euphrates bursting its banks—in their place. In the previous chapter, the prophet spoke of waters of judgment again—the 'waters of Noah' (54:9-10). However, these waters now frame God's commitment to be angry with and rebuke his people no longer. As he once placed the rainbow in the sky as the sign that he would never again destroy the world in a flood, so God now establishes a covenant of peace with his people. The judgment has passed and a new season of divine pleasure arrives, their old slate wiped clean by the retreating waters. Wrath having been assuaged, the nation is summoned to the sweet waters of blessing once again. The gift they once rejected God bestows again, more richly and freely than ever before.

The reversal of God's judgment is attended by an extension of his Davidic blessing. Through the work of the faithful Davidic Servant, the promises and status that were once enjoyed by David and his seed alone are

thrown open to all of the people. The entire nation is invited to enjoy the royal treasures of this storehouse of divine munificence. In addition to being made recipients of God's goodness, the nation is exalted to a new level of office, as it now shares more directly in the royal vocation of the Davidic Servant. The authority and dignity that were previously the particular possession of the king is now enjoyed by the whole nation.

These verses offer us a vision of the politics of a restored nation on the other side of judgment. The nation has been raised up again, through the leadership of the Davidic Servant, to stand secure among the nations of the world. No longer are they fleeing before their enemies, but nations run to them to share in God's blessing. Of all of the elements of this vision, it is probably the economic elements that are the most startling.

This passage confounds the logic of our capitalist economies. As if the owner of a great market, God summons his people to buy, yet 'without money and without price.' Wealthy or penniless, all are called to the waters in the same manner, invited to share in the Promised Land's riches, its wine and its milk. Those who have been weighing out silver for things that do not sustain them and expending their wages on items that do not satisfy are called to delight in God's abundance and to feast on the good things that he offers.

The powerful images of this passage might remind us of God's provision for his people in the wilderness journey. Like the waters, wine, milk, and bread offered here, the manna of the wilderness subverted the logic of

regular human economies. It couldn't be accumulated and stored. None experienced lack, yet none had excess. The needs of all were perfectly met in plentiful divine gift. In the invitation of this passage, the possibility of a world beyond the fundamental economic inequalities of human society and the bitter exigencies of scarcity-driven economies is once more seen.

The absence of a price tag on the waters, wine, milk, and bread that God offers to his people indicates not only the gratuitous character of their bestowal, but also the fact that nothing is worthy to be exchanged with them. To put a price on God's waters would be to fail to recognize their true value, to fail to appreciate their uniqueness. The economic subversion that occurs here also ensures that these riches must be both received and enjoyed as gifts, gifts that can never be alienated from their Giver and subjected to the power-grasping often inherent in human exchanges of property. They can never become anyone's private possession, but are furnished as an open banquet to all who respond to a general invitation. In answering this invitation, the people are invited to return to the Giver, whose gifts they are, invited to return and to continue returning. The land is his open table and all of the people of the nation are his welcomed guests.

The subversive political import of the invitation of these verses shouldn't be missed. Waters, wine, milk, and bread were the most elementary blessings of the Promised Land, blessings that God here offers as a free gift to all of his people, irrespective of their social rank or economic wealth. The whole nation is elevated to enjoy royal privileges and promises. By this decisive action, God

indicates his determination to oppose and overthrow the injustice and oppression of the politically and economically powerful persons among the people.

Over recent years there has been a growing awareness of the acute problem of economic inequality within Western and particularly American society. Expressions such as the 'one percent' have become familiar and the work of such economists as Thomas Piketty have presented in sharp relief the problems entailed by the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. In addition to our increased sensitization to such issues, we continue to live in a society shaped by intensifying cycles of dissatisfaction, consumption, and disposal, cycles that appear to be both environmentally and socially unsustainable.

Isaiah's prophetic vision meets our society—just as it did to the society to which it was first declared—like a cool and scented breeze in the cruel heat of a barren wilderness. It offers us a glimpse of a better world, a world where the needs of all can be meet. When our gnawing sense of existential lack has been quenched in the enjoyment of divine goodness, we are freed from our fruitless cycles of weighing out money for items that do not sustain us and spending our wages in futile quests for satisfaction. Rather than a world where many experience deep poverty and the great riches of our society are the preserve of a privileged few, God's earth and empowered vocation are rediscovered as gifts for all to participate in. There is more than enough to go around. No one need be without.

This vision promises a new world, a world that we clearly do not yet experience. However, in reflecting upon such a vision we can find hope, determination, and a sense of direction. This is what we look forward to. This is what we must seek to make a reality. Within the life of the Christian Church, this passage acquires a new potency in our celebration of the Eucharist. All alike are invited to partake of God's food and drink at this table. There is no one percent in God's kingdom. Like those to whom this prophecy was first directed, the Church is called as a witness to the nations. Not only are we to live out this vision within the life of Christian communities, but we are to be the heralds of this vision to a wider world, those who both announce and serve as a foretaste of the promise of God's new kingdom, those who work and pray to establish the patterns of this heavenly kingdom in the lives of our earthly societies.

The Politics of New Covenant Vision

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The new covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31 is the dawn that will pierce the gruelling night of a shattered people. As they face the destruction of their nation and the prospect of a long and bitter exile, God presents his people with assurance of restoration, lodging the seed of a glorious future hope in the cold, hard soil of Israel and Judah's winter.

Walter Brueggemann identifies a number of elements to the new covenant promised here.[24] First, there will be a new 'solidarity': the separation occasioned by Israel and Judah's sin will be overcome and YHWH will identify himself as their God and them as his people. By implication, the division within the kingdom itself will end and Israel and Judah will once again be united as a single people (cf. Ezekiel 37:15-28).

Second, there will be a new 'knowledge' of YHWH. Brueggemann maintains that this is a reference both to

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[24] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 293-294

the people's knowledge of the saving tradition within which YHWH revealed himself (cf. 2:6-8) and to obedience to his 'commands for justice' (cf. 22:15-17). The reconstituted nation evinces both a new acquaintance with YHWH's identity and memory of his work and displays a new loyalty and obedience to him.

Third, the new relation will no longer be characterized by intermediation and the distance that maintained between YHWH and the majority of the people. Middle men with privileged access and knowledge, brokering relations between God and his people, will no longer be necessary. Rather, from the poorest to the richest, the youngest to the oldest, all will enjoy access to God and be acquainted with his truth. 'All know the story, all accept the sovereignty, and all embrace the commands.'[25]

All of these elements of the new covenant relation are founded upon a great act of divine initiative, an initiative which breaks the 'vicious cycle of sin and punishment' within which Israel had become trapped and opens a new page. This initiative takes the form of forgiveness. This involves a re-membering of the people's broken history, made possible by the fact that YHWH will no longer bring their sin to mind. To this point the people's history has been a bitter burden, a tale of squandered blessings and the fear of a forfeited birthright. The popular proverb of Jeremiah's day, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge,' describes the fatalist sense of a people imprisoned by their past. To this demoralized people, YHWH declares a release from all

[25] *Ibid*. 294

debts, reigniting their guttering hope. Within the past to which they once were shackled—whose weight had threatened to drag them down to the abyss—they will now discover the liberating realization of the promised new covenant knowledge of the forgiving God.

Christian appropriations of this prophetic passage have often been inattentive to its political dimensions, exhausting their applications of it within discussions of the spiritual renewal of individuals and voluntaristic ecclesiologies. Yet both the situation addressed and the promise extended to those within it are political in character. This prophecy is declared to a riven polity, the history recalled is one of national constitution and declension, the predicament answered is national judgment and exile, the sins forgiven are those of kingdoms, and the promised new covenant is to be made with political bodies—the houses of Israel and Judah.

The political dimensions of the new covenant promise can most readily be parsed as we follow the prophet in regarding the new covenant against the foil of the covenant established at Sinai.

At Sinai God graciously gave the Torah as the constituting charter of the people he delivered from Egypt, bringing them into a marriage with him ('*…though I was their husband*'—verse 32). Within the new covenant, God will place his law within the minds and hearts of his people. Although we may be accustomed to thinking of the law of God as a code for private morality, there is good reason to regard the law mentioned here as essentially the same as that given at Sinai—a charter for national existence.

As such a charter, the law does not just command, but also vests authority. In Jeremiah 1:9-10, YHWH placed his word in the mouth of the prophet, thereby setting him over kingdoms and nations (cf. Ezekiel 3). The law placed in the hearts and minds of the house of Israel and Judah is a dissemination of political sovereignty to the entire populace, empowering them to act as representatives of YHWH's authority. The placing of the law in the hearts and minds of the people might also imply an extension of YHWH's dwelling place. Whereas the Ark of the Covenant once held the tablets of the covenant within the Holy of Holies and was especially associated with the presence of YHWH, now the minds and hearts of all of the people will bear the Torah, extending the most holy space.

As I have already noted, a further dimension of the new covenant is the cessation of intermediation, something that was markedly characteristic of the covenant forged at Sinai, for which Moses was the mediator. As all know YHWH and bear his law in their hearts and minds, the need for particular mediators to negotiate relations with YHWH and act as intermediaries between him and his people—communicating a privileged knowledge of his truth and exercising an authority that is their privileged possession—no longer exists.

Elsewhere in Scripture, the new covenant is associated with the gift of the Spirit. While the Torah is the authorizing charter of national existence, the Spirit is the empowering source of authoritative political leadership. It is the Spirit who rests upon the leaders of Israel. The Spirit given to Moses is placed on the seventy elders in

Numbers 11, equipping them for their task of judging and leading the people. At that time, Moses expresses the wish that the Spirit of YHWH would rest upon all of his people, extending the power and gift of rule to the entire nation. The desire articulated by Moses in Numbers 11:29 is presented as a prophecy in Joel 2:28-29 and as a promise being realized by Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21).

Embedded within this prophecy is a fecund vision of a sort of utopian polity, a polity where political authority is the possession of all, where each person is the trusted bearer of the national identity, where our past is restored to us and we are furnished with a future, released from the crushing debts accumulated through past failures. It presents challenges to certain prevailing political notions, not least those which present an antipathy between law and freedom: in Jeremiah's new covenant, the fullness of freedom arrives through the internalization of the law. The placing of the law in the heart and mind equips and empowers us freely to provide appropriate responses to God's world, expressing his rule within his creation in loving wisdom and delight.[26]

In a stimulating article on anarcho-monarchism, David Bentley Hart describes the difference between two sorts of political visions that we encounter as we traverse the 'burning desert floor of history.' The first 'hover tantalizingly near on the horizon, like inviting mirages' and in the futile pursuit of them we can all be led to our

[26] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* [Second Edition] (Leicester: Apollos, 1994) 24-26.

deaths. The second, however, are like 'cooling clouds, easing the journey with the meager shade of a gently ironic critique, but always hanging high up in the air, forever out of reach.' It seems to me that Jeremiah's vision of the new covenant requires the addition of a further category to this taxonomy, that of the espied promised land. As in pursuing Hart's mirages, our premature attempts to enter into the reality of such a vision in our political life are doomed to perish deep within the wilderness of human weakness and wickedness. Handled carefully, such a vision can provide benefits akin to Hart's 'cooling clouds,' exposing the limitations of our political realities, protecting us from misrecognition of the relative goods within our polities with more absolute ones, while inspiring us to aim higher. However, unlike both of Hart's visions, the espied promised land declares the temporariness of the desert of history and, to those with faith to receive, a rich burden of clustered grapes affords a foretaste of that future hope.

The Politics of the Impossible

Ezekiel 37:1-14

In a remarkable vision, the prophet Ezekiel is transported to a valley littered with bones, picked clean of their flesh by carrion birds, and dried out and bleached by the unforgiving sun. The valley—probably a particular valley as the definite article is used—appears to have been the site of a terrible defeat. The bodies of the slain were not granted the dignity of a proper burial, suffering the dreadful curse mentioned in Deuteronomy 28:26. However, by now the last of the bones has long since been stripped of its flesh. Death has finished its gruesome meal and Ezekiel stands surrounded by the scraps from its plate.

Earlier on, Ezekiel had prophesied that the idolatrous nation would be judged for its idolatry, their corpses laid beside their idols in the valleys, and their bones scattered around their altars (6:1-7). This signal judgment would be proof that YHWH was God (6:7). Now, the dust long since settled, Ezekiel stands in the valley, surveying the aftermath.

YHWH asks Ezekiel whether the bones can live. Whether it is one of uncertainty or conviction, the

prophet's response is one which leaves the possibility open. Up until this point, Ezekiel has been a passive observer and reporter upon the scene. Now, YHWH charges him to prophesy directly to the bones, a seemingly pointless endeavour if ever there were one.

As Ezekiel obeys the command to prophesy to the bones the earth quakes and there is a rattling as the bones start to come together, reassembling themselves at the word of YHWH, becoming wrapped in sinew and then clothed in flesh. The bodies now restored, Ezekiel is instructed to summon the four winds of heaven, to breathe into them and restore their spirit. In quaking earth and rushing winds we see the whole of nature thrown into a sort of sympathetic tumult as this great miracle is being effected, the ground restoring the bones that it had claimed and the winds bringing back the breath. The processes of death run in reverse as a great army of slain stand on their feet again and breathe once more. The bodies of the slain are also recreated in a manner akin to the first creation of Genesis 2:7, their bodies being formed first, before the animating breath is breathed into them.

Once the great army is restored to life, YHWH instructs Ezekiel concerning the meaning of the vision. The dry bones are the house of Israel, who believe that their hope has gone and have compared themselves to dried bones. However, as YHWH's creative word is prophesied into the situation, he will restore them, even though Death itself would stand in his way. Just as his identity as God was proved by his bringing them to the grave of exile in judgment for their idolatry (6:7), so he

would be proved to be God as he delivered them from that grave and restored them to the land (37:14). The promise that he would put his Spirit within them might recall the promise of 36:25-27, a promise that the nation would be animated with the strength that they need to serve YHWH aright.

The role of Ezekiel in this vision should be attended to. YHWH doesn't restore the dead bones of Israel to life immediately, but through the inspired word of his prophet and by means of the work of earth and wind. The words of the prophet are powerful, and capable of bringing life to a dead nation. The same image is employed by Jesus, who relates two different forms of resurrection: national resurrection through his word during his ministry and bodily resurrection at the final judgment (John 5:25-29).

The power of the prophet's word is described in Jeremiah 1:9-10:

> Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

As the bearer of the divine word, the prophet brings YHWH's own creative power to bear upon situations that have long passed into the realm of hopelessness, situations where Death has completed its work. We may be accustomed to reading Ezekiel's vision primarily as a

record of God's power to restore life. Yet, in recognizing the means by which YHWH exercises this power—through the words of his prophet—we can discover an important principle for our social and political activity.

Looking out over the valleys of dry bones of our own day, we may feel inclined to join with Israel's lament. Ezekiel's prophecy of dramatic divine restoration—a restoration so improbable and remarkable that it can only be effected by an act of new creation—summons us to a new hope, to a great expansion of the horizons of possibility. It also calls us to a new confidence in the role that we can play in bringing life to dead situations. As we bear God's word, we may even prophesy new life into political and social causes that are lost beyond hope of redemption.

The work of politics is constantly framed by visions of the possible and the impossible. For instance, Slavoj Zizek has observed that, for most people, it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. When such political possibilities have been surrendered, political action becomes a matter of accommodation to, palliation of, or minimal mitigations of a hopeless situation. This quenching of the imagination, the constriction of the horizons of the possible, and the consequent guttering of the hope of meaningful action towards change is what Ezekiel addressed in his day.

As we witness YHWH's use of the voice of his prophet to bring about a deliverance and restoration beyond hope, we can find the confidence to hold open the impossible possibilities, acting with confidence in God's power to

work through us to transform our world. Like the prophet Ezekiel, we may be called and equipped to become the handmaidens of a remarkable eucatastrophe.

The Politics of Hospitality

Matthew 25:31-46

Along with the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares and the Parable of the Dragnet, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is one of the great separation parables of Jesus' ministry. Arrayed before the exalted and enthroned Son of Man in a great assize, the nations are divided by the King, as a shepherd divides a flock into sheep and goats, the sheep to the right, the goats to the left.

Despite being very familiar, this parable raises a number of questions. One concerns its relationship with the rest of the material of the Olivet Discourse. This parable occurs at the end and climax of Matthew's version of this discourse, where Jesus speaks of coming judgment upon Jerusalem and of the *parousia* of the Son of Man. A number of commentators have maintained that there is a significant temporal hiatus located at some point between an earlier part of the discourse and the later—the former dealing with the events of AD70 and the latter with the end of all things—a hiatus that is unclear on account of Jesus' telescoping or collapsing of eschatological horizons. The connection and relationship between the two parts of the discourse needs to be identified.

A second question concerns the identity of the 'least of these' to whom Jesus refers. Many scholars are divided between a 'universalist' and 'particularist' reading of this expression (my friend Ben Kautzer has helpfully alerted me to much material relevant to this debate). Universalist readings find in the 'least of these' a reference to the poor more generally. Benedict XVI wrote: 'Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison.... Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.'[27] This reading has a strong pedigree in the Church, a pedigree dignified by the inspiration and support that it has given to remarkable practices of the works of mercy. Particularist readings, by contrast, tend to see in the 'least' of Jesus' brethren a reference to the disciples and emissaries of Jesus. However, this reading appears to undercut the remarkable support that this passage has traditionally given to the Church's ministry to the poor.

A number of considerations lead me to favour a particularist reading. The reference to Jesus' 'brethren' in the context of Matthew's gospel is most likely to refer to disciples or to persons who respond positively to the gospel. Jesus has already spoken in Matthew of his identification with the disciples that he sent out (10:40-42): 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.' In sending out his disciples, Jesus sent them without provisions,

[27] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 15

making them entirely dependent upon the hospitality of the places that they visited (10:9-10). The manner in which his disciples were received and treated would serve as a basis for the condemnation or blessing of a city (10:12-15).

Whether or not a large temporal hiatus exists, the end of Matthew 25 appears to involve a widening of the lens of the discourse. Whereas the passages that precede it have been focused upon the judgment of Israel and Jerusalem, here it is the judgment of all of the nations that is in view. The identification between Jesus and his emissaries was first spoken of in the context of the disciples' mission among the towns and villages of Israel: this parable seems to envisage the expansion of this into a broader mission among all of the nations of the world. Like the towns and villages of Israel, the nations will be judged by the hospitality or hostility they show to the poor brethren of Jesus. The mission to the nations is in continuity with and is an escalation of the disciples' earlier mission to Israel and will lead to a similar judgment.

Although it has been suggested that the particularist reading of the 'least of these' challenges the ministry to the poor that this passage has inspired, I believe that this is a mistaken conclusion. The key element of the parable that we are in danger of forgetting is that Jesus comes incognito and the sheep entertain him unawares. We do not know the ones in whom Christ will come to us. If Christ is simply encountered in every poor person or in every known member of the Church, the unwittingness of the welcome is lost. Although Christ's presence may be

made especially visible in the Christian community, it exists unknown in persons beyond it and his Spirit moves untraced beyond the realm of the Church, gathering people in.

By coming to us incognito in the form of the destitute, the needy, and the stranger, Christ tests our posture towards these people in general—*only by a universal extension of hospitality can we enjoy Jesus' particular presence.* As Hebrews 13:2 declares: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' Only in welcoming all such persons can we be in a position to receive Christ. The Church must live with an open door and an open heart, because that is where Christ meets it.

It is much safer to conceive of Jesus' presence as something that can be clearly located: in the Eucharist, in the preaching of the gospel, in the body of the Church. A Jesus who can come to us as the unrecognized stranger, as the illegal immigrant, as the foreigner, as the vulnerable child, as the prisoner, as the outcast, as the despised minority—even as our enemy—can terrify us. How can we welcome such a King?

The connection of the test of hospitality with divine judgment is not merely found in Jesus' teaching. In Genesis, we witness the stark contrast between the unwitting welcome that Abraham extended to the angels and the attempted gang rape of the angels in Sodom. In Ezekiel 16:48-50, God declares that Sodom's condemnation was related to its indifference and cruelty to the poor and the needy, displayed in their treatment of the two unknown visitors.

On various occasions throughout the Scriptures, we see that the revelation of the presence of Christ or the constitution of his people is rendered contingent upon the extension of hospitality to the poor and those in need. It was in the act of mercy of the Good Samaritan that a new neighbour relation was formed and new brethren—the Samaritan and the man who fell among thieves—were separated from those who had excluded themselves by their indifference to the one in need. In that parable the people of God are established through the act of mercy. At Emmaus, it was only through the hospitality extended to the unknown Stranger that the presence of Christ was made known and a regular meal became Eucharistic.

Something very similar occurs in the parable of the sheep and the goats. It is as the sheep receive Jesus' poor brethren that they receive Jesus himself unawares. It is through this act of receiving Jesus' poor brethren that they themselves are marked out as the blessed heirs of the Father with them. The precondition of fellowship with the exalted Son of Man is the welcome extended to the Jesus who comes to us in the guise of the needy stranger.

There are many political lessons to be drawn from this passage. This age is one in which all nations are exposed to the great divine test of hospitality, a test of eschatological consequence. For a Church that often concerns itself with the accumulation of cultural power and institutional autonomy, this passage may be a summons to be a people more dependent upon the hospitality of others. The reminder that Jesus comes to us and to our societies as one utterly dependent upon our hospitality is also of immense importance. Our society's

welcome to the exalted Son of Man should be sought first, not in our grand cathedrals, or in eloquent prayers in our halls of power, but in soup kitchens and prison cells, in shelters and in refuges.

On that great Day of Judgment, will we be found to have rejected the brother or sister of Jesus who came to us in the protester on the streets of Ferguson, in the illegal immigrant in our detention centre, in the sexually trafficked woman in our city, in the young man in our prison system, in the unborn child in the womb, or in the homeless person on our streets? Or will we, in a glorious moment of epiphany—finally recognizing the One whom we once welcomed unawares—discover that the stranger was a member of his family, a family to which we also have now been revealed to belong?

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

The Politics of the Individual

Mark 1:4-11

While Matthew and Luke begin with nativity stories and John begins with the Word that pre-existed creation, in the gospel of Mark we find ourselves immediately plunged into the action: a desert prophet named John is baptizing on the banks of the Jordan. Mark's sudden beginning and abrupt ending may leave many of his readers somewhat disoriented. However, the evangelist has not left us without any bearings. What he has given us is a quotation, a person, and a location. For those who are aware of the significance of these elements in conjunction, Mark's introduction to his gospel has—with an admirable economy of strokes—deftly set the scene for an incredible drama.

The quotation—while not included in today's lection—is a composite of a few texts: Malachi 3:1, Exodus 23:20, and Isaiah 40:3. Mark weaves together these threads of Old Testament prophecy into a scripturally resonant declaration of the new exodus and Israel's restoration, allusively identifying the parts played by both John and Jesus within this drama (as Richard Hays observes, by presenting John as the one preparing the way of the Lord,

Mark makes an 'implicit claim about Jesus' divine status'[28]).

The person is John the Baptist—the voice of one crying in the wilderness, the advance messenger of YHWH's return to Zion. It might surprise some readers that Mark, so terse in much of his narration, should needlessly expend words describing John's clothing and diet. However, once again, these seemingly extraneous details are carefully chosen. They have the effect of placing John within a rich web of scriptural associations and symbolism. John is most immediately connected to the character of Elijah, who was also a desert prophet who wore a leather belt and a hairy garment (2 Kings 1:8; cf. Zechariah 13:4). John is also associated with the camel, an unclean desert animal, and with foods that are evocative of both the blessings of the land (wild honey) and the threatening opponents of Israel (locusts).

Finally, Mark places us in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan. To any attentive reader of the Old Testament, the location of the action with which Mark's gospel begins will be noteworthy. The Jordan River and its crossing played a crucial role in the formation of Israel's identity and within its history. It was at the crossing of the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan, that Israel first received its name (Genesis 32:22-32). It was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua that marked the definitive entry of Israel into the Promised Land after their period of wilderness

[28] Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), 21.

wandering. The location of John's baptism necessitated a large number of Israelites symbolically leaving and re-entering the land through the Jordan's waters. In the Jordan they were placed within the waters of Israel's drama, reconnected with it in a place where in a large multitude's penitence the pangs of a promise nearing its realization were experienced and a people approached the moment of its rebirth.

The banks of the Jordan were also a place of transition and succession. It was at the Jordan that Moses passed the baton of leadership to Joshua, Moses' preparatory desert ministry being succeeded by the mission of Joshua within the Promised Land. It was at the Jordan in 2 Kings 2 that the desert prophet Elijah passed the baton of his prophetic mission to Elisha, a prophet who worked many wonders in the land. When John the Baptist, who is strongly associated with Elijah, is introduced to us on the banks of the Jordan, in connection with Mark's Old Testament citation, we know that the stage is set for a dramatic new period of ministry to commence. The dryness of the desert will be left behind for the opened heavens and Spirit's descent upon a new blessed land.

John and those baptized by him are the vanguard of the great return of YHWH to Zion, a return that begins with the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus comes up from the water, like the land drawn from the sea at creation, the Spirit descending upon him like Noah's dove, the firstfruits of a new world's emergence from its watery womb. It is Jesus in whom YHWH's surprising return to his people is being accomplished.

Once we have recognized the Old Testament backdrop against which Mark's narrative is placed, the significance of the events within it assumes a greater clarity. John's baptism isn't merely a generic cleansing ritual, but evokes the formative water-crossings of Israel's history. While John's baptism might be interpreted by some as occurring chiefly in service of an elevated individual spirituality whipped up by tumultuous times, its location is pregnant with the promise of a new beginning in *Israel's* history. It is through Mark's shrewd choice and deployment of his Old Testament citations and allusions that the national and political significance of the events he recounts appear to his readers.

The political and social disruption and unsettling occasioned by John's prophetic ministry has been widely recognized. John directly challenges the establishment figures of Israel. Some have suggested that John's ministry of baptism of repentance for the remission of sins puts him in competition with the established ministry of the temple and its authorities. John also speaks out against King Herod's adultery and forfeits his life as a result (Mark 6:17-29—there is a suggestive parallel between the relationship between the characters of Herod, Herodias, and John in Mark and that between Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah in 1 Kings).

The political significance of John's action of baptism, however, needs to be more deeply appreciated than it often has been. John's baptism is a prophetically symbolic act whereby the nation is renewed in preparation for YHWH's return. It establishes a division within the nation with respect to the nation's foundational identity

and destiny. It troubles and challenges the establishment's claims to represent and secure these things for Israel. It brings members of the nation back to a source from which its communal life can be reformed. Prophets such as Elijah and Elisha were not only the bringers of a message to their nation, but established and led communities of renewal and challenge within it. John the Baptist and Jesus operate in the same way.

Oliver O'Donovan has remarked upon the way that, in moments of national crisis in Israel's history, the prophetic summons to the individual often comes to the fore. He observes:

> [W]e may say that the conscience of the individual members of a community is a repository of the moral understanding which shaped it, and may serve to perpetuate it in a crisis of collapsing morale or institution. It is not as bearer of his own primitive pre-social or pre-political rights that the individual demands the respect of the community, but as the bearer of a social understanding which recalls the formative self-understanding of the community itself. The conscientious individual speaks with society's own forgotten voice.[29]

The Israelites who came to be baptized by John were performing such a role. In the face of corrupt leaders and

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[29] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 80.

institutions, these common people bore the identity of Israel in themselves, returning to the banks of the Jordan River so that they might be restored and re-established as a people in God's favour. Most importantly, it was as the great individual bearer of Israel's identity and destiny that Jesus himself was baptized.

Accustomed as we are to thinking in terms of an individual-state polarity, it can be difficult for us to recover the political significance—*and responsibility*—of the individual as the bearer of the social understanding. We too readily cede custody and responsibility for the preservation of our national and social understanding and character to public institutions and state agencies and forget that we are also entrusted with it as individuals. When our societies decay or disintegrate, as individuals we can shear off into fractured groups, cut loose from any deeper shared identity and life beyond ourselves. Alternatively, we can remain to give voice to our jeremiads from the sidelines, deeming our accountability discharged in the provision of cultural critique or lament over national apostasy or declension.

As we read the beginning of Mark's gospel, it might be worth considering what sites and sources of communal and national identity are the equivalent of the banks of the Jordan for us. Where might we as individuals recover the lost or compromised self-understanding of our communities? How can we forge communities of renewal, from which the life of our wider societies can draw new strength? How can we actively take responsibility as individuals for the health and wellbeing of our communities? How might we as individuals make the

paths of the Lord straight within the places and societies where we find ourselves? How can we prepare the way for and proclaim the Lord's arrival into our common life? As individuals we have been formed and shaped by our societies and communities: through our committed action, memory, and hope, we can be the means of their renewal.

The Politics of Service

Mark 10:35-45

There are many prominent examples of theological code-switching in the New Testament, whereby terms and phrases with familiar weight and significance in a given frame of reference are given new meanings, invested with different values, or radically re-contextualized. Values and terms such as strength and weakness, master and servant, freedman and slave, rich and poor, or exaltation and humiliation are frequently code-switched in the most surprising ways within the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Within Mark 10 we encounter one of the most significant examples of this, as Jesus contrasts the pattern of rule that holds among the Gentile nations to that which must be among his disciples, declaring that any who would be first or greatest among them must be the servants of all.

Such examples of code-switching need to be approached and handled with considerably more care and attention than they commonly receive. There are various dangers that surface at such points. Perhaps the greatest of these is the temptation to resort to a sort of code-switching that leaves underlying injustices and inequities

unaddressed and often even discourages action. An impotent yet palliating transvaluation that neither effects nor entails transformation can take the place of meaningful change. The poor, we may be told, for instance, are rich in Christ, yet such fine-sounding affirmations are seldom embodied either in behaviour that treats the poor as enjoying any spiritual advantage nor in the concern for their material needs that should accompany such recognition. Misuse of code-switching can dull us to injustice, substituting for, rather than spurring on, concerted efforts towards overcoming it. Ultimately, however, the world is not saved by redescription, but by resurrection.

Jesus' code-switching of the cultural frameworks of rule, greatness, mastery, and pre-eminence within our passage has been deeply attractive to many, yet many of those who claim to be governed by it have subjected it to harsh ideological servitude. Writers such as Bethany Moreton have described the way that the notion of 'servant leadership' has provided an appealing framework for American evangelical culture, whether in the business, church, or domestic realm and has also been enthusiastically adopted by large companies such as Wal-Mart.[30] While it has occasionally produced concrete changes in the practice of power, all too often the terminology of 'servant leadership' has functioned more as a new coat of paint upon old modes of social politics,

[30] Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 100ff.

an act of rebranding that delivers on little of its promise and often even exacerbates existing problems through its affordance of new rationalizations.

Jesus' teaching regarding rule and service has also proved susceptible to mistreatment on other counts. A number have interpreted it as flattening or levelling out distinctions of rule, producing a radical new egalitarian order, where no one exercises authority any longer. Rulers are now servants and servants rulers, evacuating both terms of any meaning. Hence it is supposed that both authority and submission to authority are rendered inoperative among Christians. Yet this isn't what Jesus teaches, as closer attention to his teaching on the subject here and elsewhere will reveal.

James and John's presumptuous request with which our lection begins provides the context for Jesus' later teaching; we will better understand the teaching if we attend to the detail of Jesus' initial response to them. The brothers request the places of greatest honour alongside Jesus in his kingdom. Jesus, significantly, does not deny that such places exist. Indeed, in a related passage in Luke 22:24-30, Jesus declares that he will bestow a kingdom upon his disciples, who have continued with him in his trials, granting them to sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus' response rather draws James and John's attention to what is required of any who aspire to such positions of honour: they must be 'baptized' with Christ in his baptismal ordeal of violent death and share with him in his cup of suffering.

Verse 45, the statement with which Jesus concludes his teaching, reinforces this point. Once again, Jesus is the

paradigm of true servanthood and of true greatness, pre-eminence, and rule. It is critically important to recognize that, when Jesus' practice is allowed to give more defined form to his teaching at this point, it becomes apparent that existing models of rule are genuinely transformed—not merely rebranded—without rule and authority thereby being evacuated of all force of meaning. There is a reversal of the prevalent practices of power, without a relinquishment of authority altogether.

The images of rule and authority to which Jesus repeatedly returns are images formed by realities such as servanthood, shepherding, and fatherhood, all images in which themes of care and nurture for those placed in one's charge replace culturally prevalent themes of subjugation, tyranny, dominance, and self-advancement. Luke 12:35-48 provides some instructive and illuminating parallels at this point. Verses 42-48 speaks of the good steward who is appointed ruler of the household by his master and faithfully discharges his duties, giving all other servants their rightful portions and watching his master's house. This good steward is contrasted to the wicked steward who, rather than providing for his fellow servants, employs the resources and authority committed to his charge for personal pleasure, mistreats those under him, and fails to keep watch over the house. Most startling of all, however, is the image of the master returning to find faithful and watchful servants in verse 37, placing them at his table and personally serving them.

Jesus, I believe, implies a similar image of rule in our passage. The true ruler is akin to the household steward who must look after and serve his fellow servants, treating

them as those who have, through an amazing act of divine grace, been granted the status of beloved sons and daughters. As the representative of his master in the rule of his household he has genuine authority, but it is an authority that must be exercised for the edification and benefit of others. Christian rule is chiefly discharged in service to others on behalf of and in faithful obedience to a greater Master. Such rulers will be granted positions of particular honour, but these positions are attained through suffering service for the sake of those committed to their charge by their Master, not self-aggrandizement.

Jesus' contrast between the pattern of rule that should be characteristic of his kingdom and the rule that is characteristic of the kingdoms of the world is not merely a lesson for church leaders, but also implies the possibility of a different model for the politics of this age, a possibility given more shape in passages such as Romans 13. Here we see the political ruler represented as the servant or minister of God, charged with representing God's own rule and authority to us for our well-being (Romans 13:1-4). Within this framework, the ruler must answer to the higher authority of God himself and is responsible to act for the good of those persons over whom has been entrusted with authority. Both in the case of the leader in the Church and the political ruler, the authority represents God in ministering God's gift of provision, just judgment, security, and instruction to his blessed people. Authority and rule in such a paradigm is never a matter of private privilege and prerogative but always the faithful ministration of a gift—a common

good—to its designated recipients in obedience to a higher Master.

The astonishing code-switching that this represents should still retain the capacity to surprise, even in societies where the effects of attenuated expressions of this radical ethos of rule have done much to weaken the hold of the more extreme and overt forms of the dominance politics of the Gentiles that Jesus describes. Self-advancement and domination of others remain fundamental themes in our politics. Even where the language of public 'service' has been widely appropriated, the leaven of its meaning has not yet worked its way through our practice. Yet where there exists a vision—even a greatly limited one—of how rule could be different, existing regimes will not so easily restrict our political imaginations, nor rulers get by without paying at least lip service to the political ethos articulated by Jesus and dissembling their deeper motives. This is a very limited achievement, but it is a foundation upon which much can be built. For this daunting political task, Jesus' teaching has lost none of its pertinence or potential.

The Politics of Polarization

Luke 2:22-40

In his account of Simeon and Anna in the temple, Luke the evangelist once again alerts us to the greater historical and political platform upon which Jesus has arrived. In the figures of both Simeon and Anna, we see Israel's messianic expectation, faithful worship, and prophetic vision embodied. As they meet the infant Jesus, hope is faced with its realization and faith yields to sight.

Throughout his gospel, Luke places considerable emphasis upon prayer and the Holy Spirit's inspiration. These themes are strikingly prominent in Luke's portrayal of these two old covenant saints. He describes Simeon as a man upon whom the Spirit rests (v.25), as a man who receives the revelation of the Spirit (v.26), and as a man guided in the Spirit (v.26). Luke's description of Simeon's 'seeing' the Lord's Messiah—God's salvation—also carries prophetic overtones: Simeon has been given the prophetic vision required to perceive in an infant the arrival of Israel's expectation. The strength of the accent placed upon Simeon's enjoyment of the gift of the Spirit of prophecy in this passage is also arresting; this is the sort of language that Luke is more accustomed to using to

describe Jesus' own ministry, or that of the early Church. In the book of Acts, this Spirit—the same Spirit that has been at work in Israel and her prophets—will be poured out upon the whole Church. The hope that has gestated in the vision of Israel's prophets is arriving at its long-awaited birth.

The characterization of Anna the prophetess is also noteworthy. She is a widow of 84 years, who fasts and prays in the temple in Jerusalem night and day (the drama of Luke's gospel will also end with constant prayer in the temple—24:52-53). Her age is suggestive of numerological symbolism—seven times twelve—but perhaps more noteworthy is the intertextual connection that she evokes with the book of Samuel. The drama of the book of Samuel—a drama climaxing in the establishment of the kingdom of David—begins with a woman named Hannah fasting and praying in the temple, seeking a son. In that book, Hannah symbolizes a barren nation. The gift of her son Samuel heralds the dawning of a marvellous new era of history of Israel's history.

Luke alludes to the book of Samuel on several occasions in his gospel and the book of Acts. In the final verse of our passage, he does so again, describing the growth of Jesus in language redolent of that used of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:26). Here the widow Anna, fasting and praying in the temple, recalls her namesake Hannah, who did the same so many centuries earlier. The birth of Samuel was a harbinger of a seismic shift in the fortunes of the nation and of the mighty and the weak within it, the advance sign of God's turning of the tables. As the great kingdom of Israel found its seeds in the fasting and

prayers of the barren Hannah, so the arrival of the Messiah is here connected to the prayers of a fasting widow. By including the figure of Anna in his account, Luke implies that something comparable to the events of the book of Samuel has been set in motion through the birth of Jesus.

Reflecting upon the echoes of Samuel in this passage can provide us with a helpful avenue into our exploration of the political themes of this text. As in the book of Samuel, it is not the official religious and political leaders such as Eli who are the recipients of God's revelation and deliverance, but persons who enjoy little power or status. Luke earlier echoed Hannah's prayer in response to the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10) in his record of the Magnificat. In her prayer, Hannah prophetically recognized the birth of Samuel as an event with profound *political* ramifications. The degree to which Luke establishes a parallel between his account in this passage and that of the beginning of Samuel suggests that he wishes his readers to see similar political significance in the birth of Jesus.

Christians are often inclined to downplay the political significance of Jesus' advent. We so stress the discontinuity between Israel's expectations of a political Messiah and God's gift of his Son, who lays down his life, that the notion of Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel's politically-charged expectation can become for us a matter of some embarrassment. This supposed discontinuity establishes a breach between old and new covenants and between Israel, who first received the promises, and the

Church, who proclaims the dawn of their fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth.

It is noteworthy that our embarrassment in this area does not appear to be shared by the evangelist. Far from awkwardly registering a clumsy shift of gears in God's redemptive purposes, Luke is concerned that his readers recognize Jesus as the true fulfilment of the old covenant expectation of men and women such as Elizabeth and Zechariah or Anna and Simeon and that they see the same Spirit who inspired old covenant prophecy in Israel to be the one who orchestrates the advent of Jesus. Although the politically-freighted expectation of Israel receives a *surprising* fulfilment in Jesus, it is neither an unfitting nor an apolitical one. For the prophetess Anna, Jesus truly is the answer to Jerusalem's desire for redemption.

The words of Simeon to Mary are especially significant:

> This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

Jesus is the catalyst of crisis, a polarizing, divisive, and destabilizing force. His coming forces people to choose a side, to reveal their deepest allegiances, to show hands previously held close to chests. His destiny leads to the fall and to the rising again—resurrection!—of many within the nation. In the process, hearts are revealed. Later in Luke's

gospel, Jesus disabuses his followers of the notion that he has come to bring a comfortable peace (Luke 12:51-53):

> Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Jesus is the rock of offence and the chief cornerstone of God's new temple. Either he is the ubiquitous obstacle or the basis of everything. Either way, indifference and neutrality are not options for us. While Jesus may not have brought the military deliverance that some might have expected from the Messiah, he introduced a new principle of separation and division into history, bringing judgment upon governors, kings, and emperors as, faced with the scandal of Christ, they were left with no choice but to pick a side.

Many of us have witnessed a similar principle of division over the last few months, as events such as those in Ferguson have polarized our acquaintances on social media, revealing the secrets of certain people's hearts and pushing many to declare previously veiled sentiments. Some of us will also experience the power of such crises to catalyze division among those closest to us in fraught conversations around family meal tables this Christmas season. When such polarizing events press upon the

national consciousness, lines of affiliation and separation are redrawn and differences can come into a sharper focus.

The power of Christ to provoke division and to bring that which was formerly hidden into the light eclipses even that of Ferguson. Pilate and Herod, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, the Jerusalem crowds, Jesus' own disciples: all must pick a side. Simeon relates Jesus' power as a sign provoking opposition to his determination of the fate of various parties within Israel. The judgment and destiny of all looms as all must make their true colours known. For Luke, the destiny of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries rests in large measure upon how they respond to his ministry. The rejection of Jesus and his messengers by the leaders of his people is directly related to the divine judgment of national cataclysm in AD70.

As we bear strong witness to Christ in the present day, a similar polarizing effect can often be witnessed. God's healing justice has come near to us in his Son, sealing the doom of tyrants and the blessing and vindication of the righteous. Faithful witness and prayer precipitates division and judgment, propelling different parties towards their contrasting destinies. An appreciation of this fact should introduce a sense of the urgency and imminence of divine judgment in history as we present the message of God's kingdom to our society. To some we are an aroma leading to death, to others one bringing new life (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). The power of such a gospel and Messiah in the political world of our day should never be underestimated.

The Politics of Spectacle

Luke 9:28-36

The event of the Transfiguration occurs near the beginning of the second great phase in Jesus' public earthly ministry, as he turns his face towards Jerusalem and his death. If the initial phase of his ministry formally began with the theophanic vision at his baptism by John in the Jordan, it is the theophanic event of the Transfiguration that marks out the start of its second great movement, which in various respects parallels the first.

In each of the gospel accounts, the ascent of Jesus and his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration is preceded by a reference to Christ's future advent in his Father's glory (Matthew 16:27-28; Mark 8:38—9:1; Luke 9:26-27). Christ, clothed in dreadful majesty, and accompanied by the angelic host, will appear in dazzling and awesome splendour. Those prepared to lose their lives for his sake will share in his glory, while those who surrendered their souls to the pursuit of the world's fleeting riches and praise will be put to lasting shame.

In each of the gospels, a startling declaration of Jesus that some of those present would 'not taste death' before

seeing the kingdom of God (Matthew 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27) serves as the transition from the earlier teaching to the narrative account of the Transfiguration. The connection is important and serves to mark out the Transfiguration as an anticipatory *parousia*, a connection also made explicit in 2 Peter 1:16-18:

> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

The Transfiguration is an apocalypse (an 'uncovering') and *parousia* (a 'presence' or 'coming') of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an unveiling of the King and of the kingdom of God already secretly present and at work, beneath the swirling fog of questions surrounding Jesus' identity. Before he heads towards Jerusalem, Jesus discloses to a select group of his disciples this dazzling yet hidden reality, a reality in whose light all else must necessarily appear in a radically altered aspect. The glorified Christ is the light that once pierced the darkness of the creation, the great illuminating Truth of the world before which all falsehood will ultimately melt away, the Sun of righteousness whose dawning will herald the great and final day. Now this great and glorious King will descend

incognito into the multitude and set his face towards the most shameful and cruel of deaths on a Roman cross.

The contrast between the view from the summit of the Mount of Transfiguration and the appearance of matters from its base couldn't be more remarkable. The itinerant prophet and wonder-worker—the poor son of the carpenter—at the base; the One who is the glorious theophanic revelation of God at the summit. The powerless victim journeying towards a degrading death at the hands of plotting rulers at the base; the powerful King about to accomplish his great Exodus (ἔξοδος—verse 31), overcoming death and delivering a multitude of captives, at the summit. Bathed in the uncreated light of the transfiguration, everything appears differently and the glorious terrain of a new landscape of meaning emerges to our view.

Sovereignty has historically been manifested and exercised in no small measure through spectacle and through glory. The regal finery with which monarchs are attired, the imposing grandeur of government buildings, the elaborate ritual, ceremony, and pageantry of state occasions, the extravagance of titles and honours, the grandiloquence of state speeches, the exactitude of official etiquette, the lavishness of the provisions for state banquets, the grand exhibitions of marshalled might in military reviews: in these and many other ways sovereignty, power, and authority express and exert themselves in the mode of glory. The spectacle is the clothing of power and sovereignty, the manner in which it manifests itself to the world. As sovereign majesty and might present themselves to be gazed upon in the

spectacle, populations can be entranced, enthralled, and arrested, bound together in a sense of reverence, deference, awe, fear, solemnity, delight, or admiration, the public's imagination captivated.

In the spectacle the quasi-transcendence of sovereignty is affirmed and displayed. A constant lurking fear is that the mortality and weakness of the king's 'natural body' might appear beneath the majestic clothing of the 'body politic' (Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* is a significant treatment of this distinction), the latter proving to be naught but a fragile and fading façade over an underlying impotence, or that the mask of the state's glory might slip to expose its face of brutality. Maintaining the spectacle imbues realities with dignity and symbolic purchase in the popular imagination that they might otherwise lack.

The Transfiguration is a spectacle displaying royal glory and majesty, a manifestation of a rule that is operative in the world. Yet Christ's kingship, while gloriously displayed in the Transfiguration, is no masquerade beneath a tissue of symbolism and spectacle: his is no 'hollow crown'. Christ is a king who divests himself of the spectacle of the Mount of Transfiguration, being raised up in the immediacy of his naked mortality on the Mount of Calvary. The dazzling body of the Transfiguration and the whip-furrowed body of the Crucifixion can only truly be understood in relation to each other—they are one and the same.

Our fear of nakedness and death can often lurk within our hunger for national spectacle, for the conspicuous display of power, might, and majesty. Captivated by the

intoxicating spectacle of national sovereignty, power, and glory we can, often wilfully, inure ourselves to the ugliness, the brutality, the injustice, the corruption, the weakness, and the mortality of what lies beneath. The clothing of spectacle does not only project and display: it also covers up. The integrity of Christ's sovereignty, made known in the singularity of the transfigured and crucified body, challenges us to consider and address the ways in which our own nations' lack of integrity is dissembled behind spectacle.

The Transfiguration, as an anticipation of the final coming of Christ and the great public disclosure of his glory, foreshadows a great revelation yet to come. The judgment to come will be one of transfiguration, the creation flooded with the light of Christ's glory, revealing everything, for the very first time, for what it truly is. As all human spectacle dissolves before his splendour, what shall be found beneath?

The Politics of the Table

Luke 14:1, 7-14

In his famous work, *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias explores the transformation of manners between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. Tracing these social developments, Elias observes the gradual removal of our animality from public sight through the instilling of embarrassment, shame, and aversion surrounding contact with other bodies, the display of excessive passions, sexuality, or behaviours that foreground our physicality in ways that came to be regarded as distasteful—nose-blowing, spitting, urinating, nudity, etc.

Elias identifies a political impulse behind much of this, having its root in the rise of a courtly class. Observing the increasingly rigorous etiquette of the court became necessary for inclusion and advancement in 'polite society' and social jockeying in the realm of refinement of tastes, manners, and civility steadily displaced the martial agonism of previous ages.

The meal table was ground zero for the initial pedagogy within and the ongoing expression of this new regime of conduct, which spread from courtiers to the bourgeoisie and beyond. The new *habitus* of self-control,

dignity, and concealment of and distancing from animality was taught and manifested at meal tables, until that which originated as a social compulsion became an integral part of people's psychology.

The rise of civility in the West was a social development of the manners of the meal table that undergirded and spread a new political order, privileging cultivated courtly elites. The political importance of the meal table within this development was manifold. The meal table was—and is—a reflection of the relations between people and of their place within a broader social and material world; each meal was—and is—an opportunity to secure or advance one's place within this social order.

As our lection suggests, the same was true in Jesus' day: the meal table and the throwing of banquets were arenas within which people negotiated and competed for social status. It was also a site of intense social scrutiny and Jesus was being closely examined by the Pharisees (verse 1), who wanted to see what his table manners would reveal about him.

Jesus, however, had been engaging in some sociological study of his own, perceiving some distinguishing features of meal table behaviour in first century Jewish honour society: dinner guests pressed for the best seats and hosts invited the sort of people from whom they could hope for repayment or improved social status. Jesus addresses both groups, teaching an alternative model of table etiquette.

Jesus' teaching in this passage echoes Proverbs 25:6-7, 'Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or

stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.' As Richard Hays remarks,

> In the Lukan narrative context ... this teaching becomes more than a pragmatic hint about court etiquette; it is implicitly a directive about how the coming kingdom should impinge already on the present, producing a reversal of values and status. In the eschatological kingdom of God, the last will be first and the first last (Luke 13:30); therefore, those who are Jesus' followers should begin already to assume roles of lowliness (cf. Luke 22:24-27).

Jesus' teaching involves, as Hays recognizes, a rehearsal for the manners of the inbreaking kingdom. Rather than currying favour with their rich neighbours and adopting the manners of their regional rulers, the people of God are to cultivate the etiquette of a different kingdom, behaving as prospective members of a different court. Jesus instructs his hearers to act against their apparent social interests, in the sure faith that God's order will prevail over all others.

The table manners that Jesus called for involve the rejection of the sort of honour culture practiced in many first century Mediterranean societies. Instead of grasping for honour, Jesus' followers should be characterized by humility and self-effacement. While seating arrangements and dinner invitations were means for social climbers to accrue honour and status in their society, Jesus challenges his disciples to reject the way of honour-seekers and, like

their Master, to seek the praise of God over that of man. Abstaining from social jockeying in a society where so much depends upon one's honour and status is a costly act of faith.

The necessity of praxis grounded in radical faith in the coming kingdom is perhaps even more pronounced in Jesus' challenge to hosts in the verses that follow; rather than inviting people who can be relied upon to give a generous return upon their social investment, his followers must throw their feasts for people with no power to repay. In a society where the exchange of gifts and invitations to feasts was the basic currency by which you secured your social standing, Jesus' radical practice would seem to be reckless.

Indeed, what we call 'corruption' was general policy in most first century societies. One's political, legal, and social position could become precarious if one was not prepared to throw one's weight into maintaining circles of reciprocal gift. If one did not give gifts and invitations to the right people, you wouldn't receive the return of social honour or any assurance of social security. Consistently giving gifts and invitations to the wrong people might be an even riskier course of action: it would offend and dissociate you from people with social power.

Greco-Roman thinkers on the gift such as Cicero commonly stressed the moral importance of giving judiciously. To give freely to the poor, who lacked the means to give a worthy return—being regarded not only as economically but typically also as morally without standing—might reflect poorly upon the prudence and character of the giver.

Jesus doesn't utterly reject the underlying logic of the gift society, but completely transforms its functioning by revealing that God is the guarantor of all gifts and debts. If we give in faith to the poor and to those without the capacity to repay, we will receive a bountiful reward at the resurrection. Conversely, we need not be placed in others' debt when we receive their gifts, because God has promised to repay them on our behalf. Jesus tells us to invite the poor, maimed, lame, and blind to our suppers, rather than people who can repay us. God is the one who will reward us with a place at his table in the resurrection of the just.

Here the connection between Jesus' teaching in these verses and the teaching of the Parable of the Great Supper that immediately follows should be recognized. It is the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—precisely the same people as his disciples are called to invite to their feasts in verse 13—who are the people who sit at God's Great Supper (verse 21), while the rich reject the invitation. In associating ourselves with those without social status, we associate ourselves with those who will one day sit at the great eschatological banquet.

Much as we might want to take this teaching figuratively, it seems to me that Jesus is calling us to concrete, radical, and specific change in our actual practice, change that might come at considerable social cost to us.

It is no accident that meals and shocking departures from the prevailing manners at them are such a central aspect of Jesus' prophetic practice and teaching in the book of Luke. Jesus' meals were a symbolic means by

which he was reforming Israel around himself. Those who rejected Jesus would find themselves outside of the eschatological feast, while the poor and the outcasts celebrated within. They were also a means of inculcating a radical new *habitus* in his followers, training them in new manners, values, and community, conforming them to the order of the kingdom of God.

A communal meal remains a central feature of the Church's ongoing worship in the Eucharist. Politics and the manners and social relations that correspond to them are first learnt at the table. It is at the Eucharist that we begin to learn the manners and politics of the kingdom, where we are trained to act as cultivated members of the court of its King. It is at the Eucharist that we can learn to put others before ourselves, to extend God's goodness to those without the power to repay, to live as a thankful people, and to release people from their debts to us. As these new manners and politics become second nature to us, they should extend out to and be confirmed in all areas of our lives and practice.

The Politics of Dishonest Wealth

Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the unjust steward is one of the more peculiar parables and many readers are puzzled about what to make of it. Drawing lessons in wisdom from such a disreputable character is a tricky business and one which must be undertaken with some care.

Establishing the specific context of the parable is an important first step, and proves illuminating. Jesus is speaking to his disciples (16:1), but in the hearing of a more general audience in which Pharisees and scribes are prominently represented (15:1-2; 16:14).

The parables that precede this one—the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—are all given in response to the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees over Jesus' scandalous eating with sinners. The parables represent the prodigality of God's love to those who have been alienated from him and his desire to see them restored.

In the final parable, the parable of the lost son, there is a forceful application of the message of the three parables to the scribes and Pharisees. They are compared to the resentful and unwelcoming older brother who, on

account of his bitterness, tragically excludes himself from the festivities, his rejection of his lost brother appearing like an ugly stain against the foil of his father's effusive welcome.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin all end with a general invitation to a joyous celebration, reflecting the joy in heaven and among the angels. The parable of the lost son concludes with another such celebration, in which God's own delight is displayed. However, in a great reversal the older brother does not share the joy. Through their rejection of returning sinners, the Pharisees alienate themselves.

The parable of the unjust steward continues Jesus' indictment of the scribes and Pharisees; the Pharisees, recognizing this, react against the teaching in versus 14. The steward in Jesus' parable would have been charged with the task of managing his master's estate during the period of his absence, sorting out rents and maintaining the upkeep of the property.

The reference to 'squandering' parallels the behaviour of the lost son, who 'squanders' his father's wealth in 15:13. Perhaps the Pharisees aren't as different from the lost son as they would imagine themselves to be. There is also the possibility that the steward had been placing heavy burdens on his master's debtors, raising the rents to increase his cut.

The steward faces the imminent crisis of his removal from his job when his master calls him to give account of his unfaithfulness and irresponsibility in his duties. Like the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that follows it,

this parable presents a radical reversal of fortunes and the pressing importance of readying oneself for it.

The steward's response to his crisis is ingenious. Although he is about to forfeit his position, this fact is not yet general knowledge. He goes around all of his master's debtors and reduces their debts.

Such a reduction of debts would have made the steward a very popular man in the neighbourhood and made his master appear generous and good. The master couldn't easily remove him from his position or recover the remainder of the debts that his steward had written off without appearing cruel and arousing public disapproval. Besides, even were he removed from his position, the steward would now be welcomed by the former debtors.

In the parable of the unjust steward it is important to keep in mind that Jesus is praising his shrewdness, not his morality. The Pharisees and the scribes are the unjust stewards, the servants who have been charged with managing their master's property and tenants. However, they have been squandering God's blessings and laying heavy burdens upon his people.

The time of reckoning has finally come for them too. At this point they are faced with a choice: will they double down on their injustice, or will they use the brief remaining window of opportunity of their stewardship to take emergency action to prepare for the future?

The parable suggests that they should seek to get on the right side of their master's servants and debtors before it is too late. The servants and debtors are the common people they had been mistreating. If they were to reduce

their burdens and made friends with the poor, the poor might welcome them into the eternal habitations of the kingdom (the theme of making peace with the poor for the sake of a future part in the kingdom might also be alluded to in the rich man's address to Lazarus).

Of course, unlike the shrewd steward, the Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers were oblivious to their predicament and remained unjust. The scribes and Pharisees had not been faithful with the old covenant 'least': God will not entrust them with new covenant riches.

Jesus is clearly accusing the Mammon-serving Pharisees of abusing their power for the sake of dishonest gain from the poor. There is a change in the world order afoot and people are pressing into the kingdom. The Pharisees must take immediate action or be left out.

Jesus' teaching in verses 9-13 makes clear that the image of debts within the parable of the unjust steward is not quite the metaphorical refraction of some abstract spiritual concept that some of us might prefer it to be. The righteous handling of money remains the central theme in Jesus' exposition.

The dishonest wealth—the 'unrighteous Mammon'—of the Pharisees, the ill-gotten profits of their mishandling of God's truth, typically at the expense of the poor, calls for judgment upon them. Facing an impending crisis of divine reckoning, they can either join the kingdom movement that brings good news to the poor, forgiving debts and bringing relief from poverty, or they can stubbornly resist justice for the service of money and find themselves finally excluded.

Jesus depicts wealth as if a false god, competing with God for our worship and service (verse 13). The power of money in our lives and societies is ample proof of the aptness of such a representation: our love of money and the urge to get more is so often the force that makes our world move. Money and the imperative of economic expansion so often hold our political imaginations in thrall.

Jesus also depicts money as a bearer of injustice. With more wealth can come a greater degree of unwelcome complicity in unjust structures and exploitative dynamics. We desire more money, yet we cannot escape being implicated in the systemic unrighteousness and injustices of our economy as we become more invested in it. It is impossible to remove the whiff of unrighteousness from our money: injustice clings to it, try as we might to escape it.

The moral characterization of money itself as dishonest and unjust is an unsettling one for many of us. Money is absolutely integral to our way of lives and the suggestion that there is a rottenness that persists at the root of our society is one at which we instinctively recoil.

We set up elaborate, yet ultimately futile, means of absolving our money and economic activity of injustice, without diminishing our consumption. We buy products that promise to give money to charity for every purchase. We celebrate and enjoy entertainers who devote their artistic creations and events to raising money for a worthy cause. We buy fair trade, green, and sustainable items. Yet the scent of injustice still lingers.

Jesus' teaching here is more challenging. We must reckon more squarely with the liability and culpability that comes with money and with the reckoning that awaits its servants and all that are bound to it.

Rather than becoming the morally compromised servants of unjust wealth, we must put it to use in the service of God. We must be faithful stewards of unjust money and never its servants, lest we too become characterized by its injustice. This all begins with a new posture towards the poor.

As in the case of the unjust steward, a radical change in our handling of money is required, if we are to survive the great day of accounting that is to come. Like the steward, we must use the limited time and opportunity afforded to us to escape the clutches of our greed and expend our dirty money to pursue true and incorruptible riches. So freed from our unwitting bondage to earthly wealth and delivered from the reckoning that awaits its servants, we too may one day be welcomed to the glorious feast of the kingdom.

The Politics of Being on the Wrong Side of History

Luke 18:9-14

If the second half of Luke 17 is concerned with the manner of the coming of the kingdom of God, much of the chapter that follows addresses the manner in which people will receive its blessings. In a series of parables and teachings, Jesus presents this in terms of a number of different categories: vengeance (vv.1-8), vindication (vv.9-14), reception (vv.15-17), inheritance (vv.18-23), and entrance (vv.24-30).

While it might be easy to read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector merely as a teaching concerning the contrasting private relationships individuals have with God, when we situate the parable upon the broader canvas of Jesus' teaching regarding the coming kingdom, further dimensions emerge.

In particular, it underlines that fact that the actions of the various characters in this parable and the teachings that surround it—the persistent widow, the rich young ruler, the tax collector and Pharisee, the disciples—are oriented towards the horizon of a future and public

action of God within Israel's and the world's history. This day would bring both vindication and judgment: there would be deliverance and reward for some, and exclusion and shame for others. It would publicly reveal where everyone stood relative to God's purposes in history.

For the Pharisee, this future is awaited with a blithe assurance that he will be vindicated within it. When he looked at his life, all of the signs were propitious that he was in the right, a fine specimen of a true and faithful Israelite, a guardian of the nation's holiness, leaving him free to engage in self-congratulation under the guise of a prayer of thanksgiving. His self-confidence was powerfully bolstered by how favourably he appeared against the foil of the extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and the tax collector, his high self-regard being inseparable from his habitual judgment of others.

If the Pharisee is confident in his righteousness, the tax collector openly addresses God from a position of moral destitution and unrighteousness, throwing himself upon divine mercy. Facing the prospect of God's coming just kingdom, the tax collector is well aware of where he stands relative to it.

The need to receive God's kingdom from a position of lack or destitution is a recurring theme within Luke 18. The widow addresses the unjust judge from a position of social powerlessness. In receiving the kingdom as little children, we do so as those who are weak and dependent. In the light of the kingdom, the rich young ruler's paradoxical 'lack' is his abundance, something that he must surrender in order to inherit the kingdom aright. Finally, the disciples are promised a reward in the age to

come as they have left houses, parents, brothers, wives, and children. The tax collector who seeks God's mercy from a position of moral unworthiness is the true heir, rather than the Pharisee who presumes his entitlement.

In recognizing this parable to be one about historical vindication, something of its relevance to our contemporary situations is revealed. As those who are concerned with seeking and establishing a just society we can also understand ourselves in terms of a coming order, awaiting vindication, recognition, and reward. However, this parable exposes the dangers inherent in many prevalent ways of doing this.

While we may be less likely in our age to speak of a coming Day of Judgment and establishment of the kingdom, the vision of public historical vindication is still a potent one. While the envisaged just society may arrive less as an eschatological irruption than as a gradual development, it is still widely believed that history is headed in its direction.

This hope is a feature of our political rhetoric that enjoys considerable traction in the popular consciousness. We speak of 'the arc of the moral universe' bending toward justice or of 'being on the right side of history.' We understand ourselves and perceive our moral duty relative to this arrival of justice in history.

Yet, like the Pharisee, we are prone to self-righteous presumption. We all too easily think of ourselves as 'being on the right side of history,' as those who can be assured of future praise and vindication. In the assumption of our own justice, we can become like those to whom this

parable was addressed, persons 'who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.'

As with the Pharisee's twice-weekly fasting and tithing, practices that were originally designed to be emancipatory can become means of oppression, judgment, and exclusion, requisitioned for the bolstering of our self-righteousness. For instance, rather than pursuing actual liberation on the ground, discourses concerning justice can become absorbed with policing the boundaries of privileged social or academic cliques, cocooning them in a moral superiority, excluding or condemning those who are not adept with the jargon. The arc of history's movement towards justice just so happens to pass right beneath our feet.

By contrast, the vision of the kingdom of God in Luke is one within which we all find ourselves on the wrong side of history. If the blessings of God's justice are to be received, they must be received as pure mercy and grace, from a position of weakness, dependence, lack, and confessed injustice. As we find ourselves in such a position justification no longer provides us with the grounds for condemning others in self-assured righteousness.

The tax collector goes home justified for, although unworthy, as one who appreciates his utter lack he is able to receive the divine gift of the kingdom's fullness. To the degree that we resist perceiving ourselves as radically unjust, morally insufficient, subject to condemnation, and as wilfully and extensively complicit in evil, we disqualify ourselves from entry into the justice of the kingdom. Truly to pursue the justice of the kingdom, we must resist

any attempt to present ourselves as standing on the 'right side of history' and, like the tax collector, learn to pursue it in humility from our moral destitution, breast-beating mendicants of divine mercy.

The Politics of the King's Donkey

Luke 19:28-40

The Canadian novelist Robertson Davies, explaining the title of his celebrated novel *Fifth Business*, invented a quotation that he attributed to the Danish playwright Thomas Overskou: 'Those roles which, being neither those of hero nor Heroine, Confidante nor Villain, but which were none the less essential to bring about the Recognition or the denouement were called the Fifth Business in drama and Opera companies organized according to the old style; the player who acted these parts was often referred to as Fifth Business.' Perhaps one of the most surprising candidates for which one could defend such a designation in Scripture is the donkey.

For such a lowly beast of burden, it is surprising to see how unobtrusively significant a role the donkey plays in the history of Israel's kingdom. While it seldom occupies the centre of the narrative frame, it is a ubiquitous yet inconspicuous presence at pivotal historical moments in the kingdom's establishment and a supporting actor in prophesies concerning it. At times it serves to reveal or highlight the identities and destinies of key protagonists;

at others it precipitates or plays a part in setting in motion key events.

In Genesis 49:10-11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah:

> The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
> nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
> until tribute comes to him;
> and the obedience of the peoples is his.
> Binding his foal to the vine
> and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
> he washes his garments in wine
> and his robe in the blood of grapes;

Later, in 1 Samuel 9, the story of Saul's rise to the throne of Israel is set in motion by the wandering donkeys of his father, Kish. Saul's quest to locate the lost donkeys leads him to the prophet Samuel, who anoints him with oil and lists a series of signs that will confirm his message to Saul as he journeys back: he will be met by two men declaring that the donkeys have been found, three men will greet him bearing young goats, loaves of bread, and a skin of wine, and he will encounter a group of prophets playing musical instruments and prophesying, at which point the Spirit of the Lord would come upon him and he would prophesy and be transformed as a person (1 Samuel 10:1-9). This startling episode comes full circle as Saul returns home to a conversation with his uncle about the lost donkeys (1 Samuel 10:14-16).

In a narrative wink to the alert reader, the three signs that befell Saul are subtly and subversively alluded to in 1

Samuel 16:20: 'Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul.' The Spirit-anointed David then played music on his harp for King Saul, delivering him from the distressing spirit that afflicted him (16:23). The young lad David, secretly designated the successor to the throne, comes bearing the signs of the kingdom, signalling his destiny and establishing an ironic juxtaposition with King Saul, from whose fingers the kingdom is slipping.

The association of donkeys and mules with rule and kingship, which we first witness in Genesis 49, is further evidenced in the book of Judges (5:10; 10:4; 12:14) and later in passages such as 1 Samuel 16:1-2 where, as David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup, Ziba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride upon. In an ironic twist, Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. The association is perhaps most markedly seen in 1 Kings 1:28-40. In that chapter, in the fraught situation of disputed royal succession as David's death drew near, Solomon is decisively distinguished as the true heir to the throne through a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule.

The donkey or mule, the king's steed, is associated with peaceful rule, while the horse was an animal of war. A different sort of 'triumphal entry' occurs in the case of Jehu, who is secretly anointed by Elisha, and rides, as Jesus would later do, on a carpet of people's garments (2 Kings 9:1-13). Jehu, however, is not a meek ruler riding on a donkey, but a furious and bloody charioteer and horseman, who kills Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah

(9:14-29), who tramples Jezebel under his horses' feet as he enters Jezreel (9:30-37), and who 'cleanses' the temple of Baal in the most sanguinary of manners (10:18-28).

When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he is identified by his riding of a 'colt, the foal of a donkey,' and his mode of rule distinguished from that of the warmongering regents with their royal chargers:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
> Lo, your king comes to you;
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
> He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
> and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
> and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
> and he shall command peace to the nations;
> his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
> and from the River to the ends of the earth.

The words of this prophecy sound a pregnant note, powerfully reverberating in the resonating chamber of the history we have cursorily surveyed. It recalls the blessing of Jacob over his son Judah and some of the most glorious and tragic episodes in Israel's uneven history. This coming King is the true bearer of Judah's sceptre. He is the one who will establish the kingdom, the greater than Saul and the Son of David. He will realize the unfulfilled promise of Solomon, who fell short of his name and calling to be

the Prince of Peace. His coming will not be like that of the bellicose Jehu: the chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off and the nations will be granted a gentle word of peace.

Jesus was a master of symbolic action and the significance of his triumphal entry and the events surrounding it are rich and multi-layered.[31] As in Luke 22:7-13, where he sends Peter and John to make preparations for their celebration of the Passover, in Luke 19:28-34 Jesus gives two disciples specific and miraculously predictive instructions concerning the

[31] Jesus is like the ark entering into Jerusalem, his disciples like David removing their garments in celebration as they go before him, the rebuking Pharisees playing the part of Michal (cf. 2 Samuel 6:12-23). Jesus' geographical movements are another example. Within this and the succeeding chapters, we see a series of movements between the Mount of Olives and the Temple precincts (19:37; 21:37; 22:39; 23:33[?]; 24:50). Jesus resides on the Mount of Olives, delivers his eschatological discourse on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:3), travels out to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, and then ascends from the Mount of Olives (it is more doubtful that he was crucified or buried on the Mount of Olives, but there are a few suggestive narrative and typological details). Jesus enacts the glory of God leaving the city of Jerusalem in judgment and relocating to the mountain on the east side of the city, the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23). As the rejected Messiah, he walks in the footsteps of his father David as he fled Jerusalem following Absalom's coup, crossing the brook Kidron and ascending the Mount of Olives (2 Samuel 15:23, 30; cf. John 18:1; Luke 22:39). The Mount of Olives was a site charged with apocalyptic expectation on account of Zechariah 14:4-5 and we know that some later Jewish texts associated this prophecy with the account of resurrection in Ezekiel 37. Charlene McAfee Moss, *The Zechariah Tradition and the Gospel of Matthew* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 199-200, 213.

people, objects, and events that will meet them on their mission, and the unusual ways that the people they will encounter will behave towards them. This is all reminiscent of the Prophet Samuel's declarations to Saul in 1 Samuel 10.

Indeed, the signs of the establishment of the kingdom and of Saul as king given by Samuel correlate remarkably with the signs that Jesus gives to his disciples in Luke:

1. Saul encounters two men who declare that Saul's father's donkeys have been found (1 Samuel 10:2). Two disciples obtain a donkey according to Jesus' prediction and instructions (Luke 19:29-34).

2. Saul meets three men going up to Bethel carrying goats, loaves of bread, and a skin of wine, who freely give Saul two loaves (1 Samuel 10:3-4). Peter and John meet a man bearing a water pitcher on the day when the Passover sacrifice (a lamb or a goat) was killed. He leads them up to a house, whose master freely provides them with an upper room for the sacrificial feast, where Jesus gives his disciples bread and wine (Luke 22:7-20). This sign seems to be intermixed with the earlier surprising events that befell Saul on his journey in 1 Samuel 9: meeting women bearing water (verse 11), being directed to the site of a sacrificial meal with the prophet in the high place who bestows a special meal portion prophetically set aside for the unannounced guest (verse 22-24), speaking with the prophet in the top of the house (verse 25), and

having a kingdom bestowed upon him (1 Samuel 10:1; cf. Luke 22:24-30).

3. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Saul and he becomes a new man and prophesies (1 Samuel 10:6). The disciples are instructed to tarry in Jerusalem, where the Spirit of God will come upon them, they will receive power for their mission, and prophesy (Luke 24:49).

In giving these signs and in travelling into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus enacts the establishment of a new kingdom. As in the case of Saul, this is a kingdom that comes through a series of bewildering surprises and remarkable private signs, puncturing illusions of human control and power with indications of divine grace and orchestration. The triumphal entry manifests the coming and the character of the kingdom of God. It reveals the fulfilment of the story of Israel's kingdom and the realization of the old promises. It reveals a kingdom that does not arrive through human power or design, but as a quiet wonder and gift of divine ordering. It reveals a king who is quite unlike the warring kings of the nations. Against this divine kingdom, all human kingdoms can be seen for what they are, their penultimacy and injustices exposed by the light of this humble royal advent.

This is a kingdom that comes, not with the din and clamour of armies, their fearful fanfares, and their terrible instruments of war, but as the astonishing and wonderful unravelling of a divinely wrought eucatastrophe. The rule of God is brought near, not with the snorting and

stamping of royal stallions, or with the thunderous rumbling of tanks, but in a lowly Messiah borne on the back of a humble colt, the joyful promises and songs of the prophets before him, the fullness of God's blessing in his train.

The Politics of Word of Mouth

John 1:35-51

Contemporary political campaigning increasingly gives a central role to word of mouth. While the presidential campaigns of the twentieth century relied primarily upon the use of mass media such as radio and television, over the last decade there has been a dramatic development of the use of social media. Following ground-breaking uses of the Internet in publicizing and funding such as Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, each subsequent election has witnessed a greater emphasis upon its importance.

However, when word of mouth is often guided and leveraged by 'big data' and meticulously orchestrated social media strategies, we can become suspicious of the authenticity and spontaneity of the recommendations of our friends and acquaintances. As advertisers have come to appreciate the unparalleled access that social media gives to networks of trust and contexts of openness, they have sought to use such media to elicit our deepest emotions and mobilize our relational bonds for their ends. Ubiquitous 'viral' marketing can make us wary of the ways in which our bonds of love and trust and honest

emotions can be cynically exploited or requisitioned by other agencies for their own ends. When something as intimate as a Thanksgiving mealtime conversation can be carefully scripted by political agencies, we may begin to wonder whether the 'word of mouth' of our friends and family are merely words that have been put into their mouths.

There are many comparisons that can be drawn between a political campaign and Jesus' ministry prior to his death. During this period of time, Jesus was moving from place to place, preparing the ground and gathering 'grassroots' support across the land of Israel, in readiness for the kingdom of God that was breaking in through his mission. By the time that the early church was established, Jesus' message of the kingdom was already widely disseminated throughout the nation. Disciples and adherents of the Jesus movement throughout the country would have been ready to support the new 'administration' of the church.

In John 1:35-51, we see the role that word of mouth played in the gathering of the first disciples. Personal invitation, summons, eyewitness testimony, and recommendation are the means by which new followers are recruited to the cause. John the Baptist's mission of making straight the way for the Lord (v.23) leads him to throw his weight behind Jesus' kingdom campaign, pointing two of his disciples towards Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' (v.35). One of these two disciples, Andrew, then proceeds to call his brother Simon. The next day, in a strikingly authoritative action, Jesus summons Philip to

follow him (v.43): Philip then finds Nathanael and calls him to come and see Jesus (vv.44-46).

Although presented as a historical account, the narrative of the calling of the first disciples involves a number of paradigmatic features. While they could be read as prosaic descriptions of concrete actions, the references within these verses to following and seeking, the invitation to 'come and see,' to the place where Jesus dwelt, and the act of staying with him all involve terms or concepts that are deeply resonant within Johannine theology. Within this account we can see the spiritual pattern that holds for those who become disciples of Jesus: seeking and committing themselves to following him, coming to him and receiving new spiritual vision, and abiding with and in him.

The summons to come and see is an invitation to move beyond just taking someone else's word for Jesus' identity or to regard him from a distance, but to experience him intimately for oneself. Such an invitation is extended in the assurance that Jesus' is the 'real deal' and that the witness of John the Baptist and others concerning him will stand the test of close and extensive personal examination. It is a challenge to move beyond reliance upon word of mouth alone and to enter into a deeper acquaintance with the person of whom one has heard testimony. In I John 1:1-4 witness is made concerning the Christ in order that persons might enter into fellowship with him and his people.

In John 1, we see that those disciples who respond to Jesus' personal invitation proceed, seemingly unprompted, to extend that same invitation to others.

Having himself been invited to come and see, Andrew later finds and calls his brother Simon. Philip, having been found and called by Jesus to follow him, finds Nathanael, encouraging him to suspend his scepticism long enough to encounter Jesus for himself.

Within these verses Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael all present startling and spontaneous declarations concerning Jesus: he is the Messiah (v.41), the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote (v.45), the Son of God and King of Israel (v.49). The scepticism of Nathanael swiftly evaporates when he meets Jesus. Nathanael—an 'Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile' (v.47)—is cast as the True Jacob. Just as Jacob saw the ladder between heaven and earth in the place of God's dwelling in Bethel, so Jesus (perhaps most specifically through his cross) is presented as the ladder between heaven and earth that Nathanael will later witness.

Reading such an account of trustworthy and spontaneous word of mouth, of a proclaimed truth that punctures our scepticism, of a reality that does not merely withstand but rewards closer scrutiny, and of a personal encounter that excites us to pass on the news can seem too good to be true to many jaded and cynical ears, wearied of deceptive testimonies, overhyped disappointments, and unfulfilled promises. To such, the gospel writer would extend the same simple invitation received by the first disciples: come and see.

The role played by word of mouth in the spreading of Jesus' kingdom message since the very first days of his ministry presents us with a vision of how things could be, of a political campaign that functions without guile. It

sheds light on the false messiahs that we can establish through our political campaigns and upon the ways that we have clipped the coin of personal testimony through exaggerated, manipulative, or inauthentic witness. Just as belief in the unique messianic calling of Jesus can moderate our hopes concerning candidates for political office, so attention to the spontaneous response of testimony to a reality that proves itself trustworthy manifested in these verses can provide a standard against which we examine our own involvement in political campaigning and an ideal to which we can aspire. A politics where the invitation to come and see, when answered, never results in disillusionment.

The Politics of Exposure

John 4:1-42

One of the most effective means of political and social control is the power to expose the compromising secrets of others. The issue of government's surveillance of the private communications of their citizens has never been far from the front pages over the last year, as revelations of the extent of the NSA's spying and data collection have come to the public's awareness. The increasingly godlike omniscience of governments in the digital age, whereby every one of our actions, exchanges, or communications can be logged, recorded, traced, or surveilled has led to a growing concern among the public that this power be checked or held accountable.

In recent months, we have learnt that the NSA has kept tabs on the porn-habits of certain radical elements, in order to provide ammunition with which to discredit them. Jameel Jaffer, of the American Civil Liberties Union has observed: "Wherever you are, the NSA's databases store information about your political views, your medical history, your intimate relationships and your activities online." Although we are repeatedly assured that such information will not be abused, we know that the

fact that it exists strengthens the government's power over us. Knowing that the government has the power to expose us can render us compliant to its wishes.

The use of exposure as a means of power and social control is not a new phenomenon. People have always been vulnerable to those who know and can reveal the truth about them.

In John 4, Jesus encounters a woman of Samaria at a well and enters into conversation with her. As the woman was alone at the well at the hottest time of the day, anyone seeing her might well surmise that she was not accepted by her community. Jesus enquires about her husband. Her answer—that she has no husband—while technically true, is misleading, covering up the compromising reality of her chequered past and the probable cause of her social marginalization. Jesus reveals that he knows the truth of her history and her current situation: she has had five husbands, and the man that she is currently with is not her husband.

That this truth that she had attempted to hide—the devastating fact that rendered her a moral outcast in her community—was known by this strange Jewish rabbi with whom she was conversing might well have struck her with a sense of despair, reminding her that she could never escape the reputation that clung to her. This stranger, though completely unknown to her, had a power over her, knowing her darkest secrets. However, Jesus employed this power in the most startling way, addressing her as a worshipper and proceeding to render her a witness to him. When she shares her message—'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!'—with

the men of her city, it is clear that Jesus' knowledge of her has exerted a liberating, rather than an enslaving effect.

Jesus' knowledge of the secrets of the hearts of others is a recurring theme in the fourth gospel. In 1:47-48, he reveals that he knows Nathanael and where he has been, even before they meet. In 2:24-25, we are told that Jesus knew all men and did not need to be told what was in them. He demonstrates knowledge of people's undeclared sins in 5:14 and 8:11. At various points in the gospel he shows that he knows what is in the heart of Judas (6:70-72; 13:18-30).

In the previous chapter, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus spoke of himself as the light that had come into the world, the light in which the deeds of people were 'exposed' (3:19-21). However, although the power of exposure wielded by our governments is justifiably a cause of great concern and unease to many of us today, Jesus' power to expose is not employed in order to condemn, but that the world might be saved through him. As Jesus brings our skeletons out of our closets and thrusts our darkest secrets into his light, rather than exploiting their hold over us as a means of control, he breaks their thrall and sets us free.

Some commentators have seen a subtle allusion to the rite of Numbers 5 in this exchange (allusions that are more pronounced in the account of John 8:1-11). The rite of jealousy described in Numbers 5 was a test by which divine exposure of an adulterous woman was invoked. The woman charged with adultery was given a drink of holy water made bitter with the words of a curse scraped

into it. If the woman were guilty, God would expose her sin through the effect that the drink had upon her body.

In John 4, the Samaritan woman requests a drink of 'living water' from Jesus, unwittingly initiating the process of the ritual. Jesus immediately exposes the compromising secrets of her past. Yet no curse follows. Rather, the water offered gives eternal life and washes away all of her sins.

It is easy to conceive of God's knowledge of our secret sins by analogy with our governments' powers of surveillance and exposure. Yet in the hands of God, the godlike knowledge to which our governments aspire serves less as a means of instilling fear and exerting control than as a means of release from the forces that bind us. Instead of the limited assurance afforded by the conditionality of the claim that 'if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear,' we are granted an unconditional and free offer of comprehensive pardon, the dark and enslaving power of all our secrets dissolving in the liberty of his light.

The Politics of a Misunderstood Kingdom

John 18:28-38

Of the select group of individuals who have entered into religious creeds over the course of history, Pontius Pilate is doubtless one of the most unlikely. It was Pilate who, through his spinelessness in the face of a crowd baying for blood, sentenced Jesus to death, even while personally finding no fault in him. Beyond the canonical gospels, the man whose name will forever be associated with the crucifixion of Christ also appears in the writings of Josephus, Philo, and Tacitus.

The prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, the portrait that we find of Pilate in the gospel of John is of a man who, while wrestling with his conscience, cynically chose to send an innocent man to his death rather than risk his own hide. In John, as in the other gospels, Pilate seems to be engaged in a game of hot potato. Too timorous to stand for justice in the face of a murderous mob, he exhausts all possible options for absolving himself of the responsibility for a murder that he dare not prevent. He declares that he finds Jesus to be innocent, he

offers Jesus for release on account of a Passover custom, he sends Jesus to Herod, and he presents a scourged Jesus as an object of ridicule. At each point, the ball is put back into his court, until through his lack of nerve and his fear of the crowd he succumbs to the pressure and delivers Jesus to be crucified.

In John 18:28, Jesus is brought before Pilate for the first time. In the exchange that follows, we can see two contrasting misunderstandings of the nature of Jesus's kingship and kingdom. The Jewish authorities deliver Jesus to Pilate as a royal aspirant, the 'King of the Jews'. The triumphal entry a few days earlier (John 12:12-19) was a symbolically resonant action, characteristic of a self-styled king. We can presume that Pilate would have been informed of these charges before he began to question Jesus.

This apparent claim of kingship provided the Jewish authorities with a weighty charge against Jesus before Pilate. Any person claiming kingship in such a manner could be condemned as a traitor to the rule of Rome and sentenced to a traitor's death. The challenge that Jesus purportedly presented to Roman authority also provided the Jewish authorities and the crowd with leverage: if Pilate did not accede to their wishes, not only would the unrest of the mob present a threat to his rule but he could be presented as disloyal to Caesar and his interests in Judaea (cf.19:12).

Within the charges levelled against him in Pilate's court Jesus is presented as a political agitator, someone determined to gain power through violence. However, this impression of Jesus's claims to royal status does not

survive the cross-examination that follows and a new misunderstanding seems to take its place.

When Jesus does not provide a direct response to Pilate's first question about Jesus's claim to kingship, Pilate asks him again about what he has done. In response to this second question, Jesus provides an answer only recorded in the gospel of John. Rather than straightforwardly accepting or dismissing the accusation, Jesus clarifies the nature of his kingdom—'My kingdom is not from this world.' When Pilate inquires further concerning his claims to be a king, Jesus also explains the sense in which he is a king: 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

Between them, these two responses puncture the initial accusation. In his first response, Jesus makes clear that his kingdom is not advanced by means of violence, a startling divergence from the general *modi operandi* of political revolutionaries. In his second response, he presents himself as a king of 'truth'. As Craig Keener observes, the term 'truth' would have carried a rather different force to hearers of different cultural backgrounds.[32] To a hellenized audience, truth (αλήθεια) would have denoted insight into reality, while to Romans (*veritas*) it would have represented 'accurate, factual representation of events.'[33] Hearing Jesus's responses to

[32] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 2:1113.
[33] *Ibid.*

his questions, the Gentile Pilate would have been inclined to dismiss him as an innocuous sage, speaking of a 'kingdom' of philosophers.

Pilate's dismissive retort—'what is truth?'—seems to be consistent with his character and the prevailing outlook of the pragmatic world of realpolitik within which he was embroiled. A hard-nosed politician of his ilk had neither time nor patience for the abstractions of the philosophers. Of what use is truth in the world of power?

Both the Jewish authorities and Pilate, from their respective vantage points, misconstrue the character of Jesus's kingdom and authority. In their inability to grasp who Jesus is they exhibit the failure of the darkness to grasp the light of Christ and for the world to know its maker, as described by John in his gospel's prologue. Their obliviousness to Jesus's true identity leads to an irony which surfaces at several points during the narrative. While they are playing a crucial role in the drama, they are entirely unaware of the true import of their actions. Despite their scrupulousness in preparing for the celebration of the Passover (v.28), the Jews authorities are unaware that they are preparing a greater Passover. In referring to and presenting Jesus as the king of the Jews, Pilate is saying and doing much more than he knows.

When Jesus declares that his kingdom is not of this world, he refers, not only to the origin of his authority, but also to the fact that his kingdom operates in a manner that cannot be understood in this world's terms, and in a manner that exists in fundamental tension and antagonism with the workings of an evil world (cf. 17:14-16). Here Jesus identifies issues with which Christian

political theology will never cease wrestling. The incompatibility between the operations of Christ's kingdom and those of an evil world continue to produce opposition and misunderstandings to this day. The truth that Christ speaks to power is heard as if were a foreign tongue, lightly dismissed as inconsequential by some while attacked as a hostile and violent threat by others.

To any hearer familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus's statements concerning the truth should have held a different set of connotations. God's 'truth' is his commitment to his covenant promise and revealed character. This faithfulness, while not operating in the violent manner conceived of by rebellious Jewish patriots, was not the harmless philosophy envisaged by Pilate either. God's truth, while not proceeding in the idiom of a world of corrupt power, is more than capable of turning such a world upside-down and inside-out.

Christ's witness to this truth, to a faithfulness that upsets kingdoms of the earth and the mind, is a witness that has in turn been committed to us. As we declare the witness of Christ enacted in his life, death, and resurrection to the rulers of this world, we are assured of rejection. Few rulers, encountering the words of this foreign tongue, will call upon us to translate them. Nevertheless, as Jesus declares before Pilate, all who are of the truth will hear his witness and come to his light. Unable to come to terms with this kingdom, the world will ultimately prove powerless to resist it.

The Politics of the Mob

John 19:1-16a

Pilate claimed to find no fault in Jesus, yet he knew that the atmosphere was ugly and the frenzied crowd could only be appeased by an act of cathartic violence. By scourging Jesus, Pilate hoped to restore public order and to punish Jesus for disrupting it. The scourging—performed with leather whips with a spike or pieces of bone and iron within—was a brutal and potentially life-threatening form of punishment. Subjected to such degrading treatment and public mockery, Jesus was cast as a figure of shame and ridicule. By such means, Pilate intended to satisfy the murderous crowd.

In a twisted parody of royalty, Jesus was dressed in a purple robe and given a crown of thorns. After being abused by the soldiers and ridiculed as the 'King of the Jews,' Jesus was presented to the crowd. As the crowd looked at the broken figure standing in front of them, with his torn flesh and bloodied countenance, Pilate expected them to recognize that, whatever threat Jesus had once posed, by now it was thoroughly extinguished.

Unfortunately for Pilate, his ploy failed. The crowd insisted on crucifixion. Even though after further

questioning Pilate desired to release Jesus, he lacked the courage to withstand the murderous crowd. The crowd knew how to manipulate him, threatening to denounce him as unfaithful to Caesar if he didn't deliver the death sentence. He brought Jesus out once more before the crowd. Despite being the one charged with delivering justice, Pilate capitulated to the will of the mob and delivered Jesus to be crucified.

Throughout this account, the gospel writer traces a rich vein of irony. Within the context of the developed incarnational theology of John, 'Here is the man!' is an ironic declaration of the profound truth that lies the heart of the gospel. In the parallel exclamation—'Here is your King!'—which occurs later in the narrative, Pilate unwittingly reveals the true contours of the situation. The mocking use of this title serves to provoke the chief priests' reaction: 'We have no king but the emperor!' Through this response, John presents the chief priests as servants of Rome's agenda and as those who reject the heritage of Israel.

The driving force within this narrative is the power and violence of the mob. Nothing proves capable of withstanding this power. Even Pilate, who desires to release Jesus, is unable to resist it and ultimately surrenders to it and is absorbed into it. The mob won't be pacified without a victim. Pilate is prepared to use someone such as Barabbas as a—conveniently guilty—scapegoat upon which the fury of the crowd can be expended. However, for the crowd only Jesus will do.

More than any other writer, René Girard has revealed the dynamics whereby a victim can act as a lightning rod

for the violence of society.[34] The guilt of the victim is a matter of indifference: all that matters is that society turns upon the victim together. The various interpersonal tensions that exist within society and between its members can be released through such a communal act of shared violence, and peace, unity, and harmony can be restored.

As our desires are imitative, resisting the social contagion of the 'scapegoating mechanism' when it is in full force is incredibly difficult. Even those who don't want to give into it must bow. In the gospels Jesus's own disciples forsake him and Peter denies him. The scapegoat mechanism is like a social avalanche, catching people up into it and crushing all that would stand in its way. Those who are caught up in it are in the grip of a greater power and are unaware of what they are doing. Earlier within the gospel, Jesus spoke of the coming of the 'ruler of this world' (14:30). The behaviour of the crowd in the period of the betrayal, trials, and crucifixion of Christ is akin to that of a possessed person. The many individuals within the crowd fuse into a single entity, driven by a violent frenzy none within it can withstand or understand.

Girard argues that many ancient myths tell of the operations of the scapegoating mechanism. However, as they view things from the perspective of the crowd, these myths do not appreciate the true nature of what is taking place. Rather, the sacrifice of one person—often subsequently divinized—is seen to restore peace and avert

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[34] René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001)

social disaster. The contrast with the gospel account is stark. In the gospels we view the storm of the scapegoat mechanism from the position of the innocent victim in its eye. In the record of the gospel the evil character of the mechanism and the manner of its operation are exposed for all to see. Once the scapegoat mechanism has been revealed, it can no longer operate with the same strength.

While the scapegoat mechanism has been brought into the light, it has not ceased to operate within our societies. The social contagion of the scapegoat mechanism need not terminate in murder or actual violence. The same dynamics can be seen in the ostracization of certain parties within a family or workplace. It is at work in our attitude to outsiders, supporters of opposing political parties, persons of other races, religions, or sexualities, to immigrants, to the extremely rich or to the poor, to liberals or to conservatives. The victims of the scapegoat mechanism need not be innocent: it can be directed against 'hate figures' such as paedophiles, who truly are worthy of condemnation. Nevertheless, the guilt of the victim never justifies the frenzy and the violence of the mob.

Social contagion is an intoxicating and powerful force. It gives us a sense of unity. As Chris Hedges has expressed it, 'war is a force that gives us meaning.'[35] It can be witnessed in the cycles of outrage that run through social media or in the way that the atmosphere suddenly turns against a particular group within society, leaving them

[35] Chris Hedges, *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York, NY: Random House, 2003)

vulnerable to attack. It is seen in the polarizing rancour of political discourse or in the way that tensions between persons fall away as they settle on a common social enemy. It is also at work in the ways that we experience common purpose through warfare and the demonization of other persons and nations. As Girard observes, the scapegoat mechanism can even hijack our laudable concern for victims to scapegoat others in their name.[36]

This social contagion is like a canker deep within our political life, affecting our politics at every level, from the political conversation around the family meal table to our nation's foreign policy. As its operations are exposed in the gospel, we must learn to recognize and resist them as they seek to insinuate themselves into our lives and communities.

The attempt to resist by sheer personal effort is insufficient against the power of this contagion. Desire is imitative and we cannot easily stand against a whirlwind of desire as it sweeps through and along the masses that surround us. As our desire is naturally bound to follow the model of others, to resist the pull of the models of desire that surround us, we must be bound to a better model instead. For the New Testament the solution to this problem is the imitation of Christ, one immune to the power of the scapegoating mechanism. As 1 Peter 2:23 declares, 'When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.' The silence and non-retaliation of Jesus in the face of

[36] Girard 2001, 180-181

persecution—clearly seen within our passage—reveal his ability to resist this social possession. It is in looking to his love, forgiveness, and peace that we will learn to relate to others in a way that avoids the evil of scapegoating and its violence.

The Politics of the Empty Tomb
John 20:1-18

Before dawn, early on the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb. The other gospel accounts mention her companions. In John's account, even though companions are implied (v.2b—'*we* do not know'), Mary is the only character in the frame. Simon Peter and the beloved disciple make an appearance later but this passage is Mary's scene. Twice Mary—the apostle to the apostles—is sent to other disciples with news, first about the empty tomb and then about her encounter with the risen Christ. After the two disciples had seen the empty tomb and departed to their homes, Mary remained weeping outside.

Unlike the beloved disciple, Mary Magdalene did not as yet believe. As our focus is so often upon the presence or absence of *faith* in the context of the empty tomb and the resurrection, it can be easy to miss the significance of Mary's response. Reflecting upon the character of Mary Magdalene, I am reminded of Tomáš Halík's description of St. Thérèse de Lisieux.[37] In a 'night of nothingness,'

[37] Tomáš Halík, *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us* (London: Doubleday, 2009), 24-45.

thrust 'far from all suns,' Thérèse experienced the complete extinction of her faith. However, when her faith died, her love continued to burn fiercely in the darkness, refusing to grant the darkness its victory.

Earlier in her life, St. Thérèse articulated her vocation to be 'love in the heart of the church.'[38] The terrible darkness into which she was later cast gave this vocation a remarkable and entirely unsentimental character. In patient and enduring love, having lost all sight of her Lord, she waits out the night which promises no dawn. If St. Thérèse was 'love in the heart of the church,' it was as one following in the steps of Mary Magdalene. Halík writes: 'Christian faith—unlike "natural religiosity" and happy-go-lucky religiosity—is *resurrected faith*, faith that has to die on the cross, be buried, and rise again—in a *new form*.'[39] It was not faith, but love, which survived the long night of Easter Saturday and it is Mary in whom this love is most visible.

The presence and absence of Jesus is a prominent theme within this passage. When she came to the tomb early in the morning, what did Mary expect to find but the *corpse* of Jesus, safely secured in its place?[40] However, the corpse of Jesus, an entity that could easily be located and made available to the senses was absent. Instead of

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[38] *Ibid.* 31

[39] *Ibid.* 42

[40] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 173

the body of Jesus, there was an absence, 'filled with a "sign to be believed"' in the folded grave clothes and the two angels.[41]

When Mary sees Jesus, she does not recognize him. He speaks to her, yet she presumes him to be the gardener. Even as Jesus is present to her, he is absent to her perception and she knows only the continuing absence of his corpse—'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus only truly 'appears' to Mary when he calls her by name—as Jesus declared in John 10:3, his sheep know the voice of their shepherd. When she finally recognizes him, Jesus tells her not to cling to him and her that he will be departing as he ascends to his Father.

The resurrection of Mary's faith occurred as her patient love, a love stronger than death, was answered by the voice of her beloved. As in Luke's account of the Emmaus Road, the risen Christ makes himself known to his people, not by subjecting himself to the control of our natural senses, by through his gift of himself in Word, Sacrament, and loving address.

The opening of the tomb on that first Easter morning is accompanied by the opening of the Scriptures and the opening of the eyes of the disciples.[42] The disciples had once been assured that Christ was the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel, the expected answer to the nation's plight. With the death of Christ, it appeared as if the promise of the Scripture had perished too. The Scriptures

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[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Ibid.* 169

were now closed to the disciples (v.9), like the stone-covered tomb.

With delicate literary brushstrokes, the Evangelist performs the resurrection of the Scriptures within this passage. Looking into the tomb, Mary sees two angels sitting, one at the head and another at the foot of where Jesus' body had lain, as the mercy-seat that covered the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:18-21). The Holy of Holies, from which access was once prevented by a veil, is now thrown open. The two angels of the new mercy-seat cover an absence—the place where the body of Christ once lay. Where once they had covered the dead testament of stone tablets in their 'coffin' (the word used for 'ark' is also used in this sense, cf. Genesis 50:26), they now mark the open site of the resurrection of the living Word. The Scriptures are 'opened' as the risen Christ emerges from their once closed testimony.

A similar 'resurrection' occurs as Mary's eyes are opened. Mary initially mistakes Christ for the gardener. The presence of a man and a woman in a garden sanctuary recalls Eden and the sudden awakening of transformative understanding for Mary parallels the opening of Adam and Eve's eyes after the eating of the forbidden fruit in Genesis. Here the eyes of Mary—the loving one who is the heart of the Easter Church—are opened not to her nakedness and shame but to her glorious risen Lord.

What does all of this have to do with political theology?

Political theology, like many other forms of theology, is in constant danger of quests to secure the stable and

settled presence of Christ. It risks denying the continuing reality of his absence and, indeed, how integral absence is to the ascended Christ's mode of presence in our world. Louis-Marie Chauvet suggests that the presence of this temptation to political theology is most acutely experienced in a moralistic tendency associated with social action.[43] Effacing the absence of the risen Christ, we risk identifying his reign with forms of this world and his salvation with our political visions of liberation. In such a manner, we would return the risen Christ to the safety of his tomb, our political praxis being the memorial of the departed prophet. This is a Christ who can be securely known apart from faith and love.

A truly Christian political theology must start with the experience of Mary Magdalene, with the death of 'natural religiosity' and the discovery of the absence of the body of Christ. Our praxis must be thrown open, like the tomb of our risen Lord. Our political activity is not the spicing of a sepulchre, containing and maintaining the presence of Christ's cadaver. Rather, it is a site of a glorious absence, a sign of resurrection to be believed by those whose loving eyes have been opened.

[43] *Ibid*. 176

The Politics of Commission

John 20:19-31

In these concluding episodes of the Gospel of John, the Evangelist returns to a number of the central themes of the book. The gift of the Spirit, signs, witness-bearing, and faith are all prominent within this passage. By drawing together these themes at this point—the conclusion of the main body of the gospel—a fitting capstone is provided for the text as a whole.

Our passage consists of two related scenes and a concluding summary statement, within which the purpose of the entire gospel is explicitly stated. While Mary Magdalene was the central figure in John's account of the earliest events surrounding the resurrection—and was the first to be commissioned, as the apostle to the apostles—the text now shifts its attention to the Twelve and the other disciples that were with them. It is with Christ's appearance to them and their consequent faith, commission, and witness that these verses are concerned.

Both of the scenes in this passage follow a similar pattern, as the disciples are assembled together behind bolted doors, for fear of the Jewish authorities (verse 19). In both cases, Jesus miraculously appears in their midst.

The first occurrence is on the first day of the week (verse 19) and the second is on the eighth day (verse 26), both numbers might hint at a theme of new creation, which, as we shall see, is borne out in other details of the text.

As Jesus appears to his disciples for the first time, he demonstrates his identity by displaying the signs of his crucifixion, the wounds in his hands and his side. The disciples' response of joy fulfils the promise that Jesus made in 16:20-22. The fact that Jesus twice repeats his statement of peace—'Peace be with you!'—suggests that it carries a particular force in this context. Jesus had earlier promised to 'leave' his peace with his disciples, a peace that should allay all of their fears, and which was associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit (14:25-27). This peace—a calm and settled security and stillness in the midst of hardship and conflict—is left as a sort of personal legacy. This peace is accompanied by a commission, as Jesus sends his disciples in the same way as the Father sent him.

The peace and the commission are received together in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The exact relationship between John's account and the Lukan account of Pentecost has been extensively debated. Whatever position we may take in these debates, we can see in this event the fulfilment, even if only symbolically and proleptically, of the various promises of the gift of the Spirit made earlier in the gospel. Such a proleptic expression of Jesus' gift of the Spirit may already have occurred in his giving up of his Spirit in 19:30. Perhaps, reading John in concert with the Lukan account, we might think in terms of a progressive gift, as a dying gasp

becomes a life-giving breath, which then swells to a mighty wind on the day of Pentecost.

Readers typically focus upon Thomas' doubts in the second scene in our passage, but his confession is arguably much more noteworthy. Of all of the disciples, it is Thomas who makes the 'climactic Christological confession' of the gospel—'My Lord and my God!'[44] In this statement we finally see the disciples arriving at the high Christology of the gospel's prologue. It is in the confession of doubting Thomas that we arrive at the definitive form of faith to which the Evangelist is summoning us as his readers. This point is underlined in the summary verses that follow: the purpose of the entire gospel is to enable us to come to this point. In Jesus' response to Thomas it is as if the fourth wall is broken and he turns to address us directly—blessed are we who have not seen and yet have believed.

Within John's account of the commissioning of the disciples, he emphasizes the continuity between Jesus' mission and that of his disciples. They are sent in the same way as Jesus himself was sent by the Father: they make known his identity in the world, just as he made known the Father. The gift of his Spirit as the guarantee and representation of this continuity of mission is reminiscent of the account of Elijah and Elisha. In 1 Kings 19:15-18, God gives Elijah a three part commission. The only part of this commission that Elijah personally fulfils is that of anointing Elisha as his successor: Elisha

[44] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 2:1210.

fulfils all of the rest. As Elijah ascends into heaven in 2 Kings 2, Elisha receives the first born portion of his spirit and embodies and completes Elijah's mission. A similar pattern of prophetic succession is implied here: Jesus' gift of his Spirit equips his disciples to embody and complete his mission.

Jesus' use of a life-giving breath might suggest a further set of echoes within this account, echoes that are especially resonant within the context of the surrounding new creation typology. Just as in Genesis 2:7 God breathed life into the first human being to continue and complete his creative work of taming and bringing order and life to the world that he had established, so Christ breathes the Spirit of life into his disciples to continue and complete the work of new creation.

The commission accounts of the synoptic gospels place their primary accent upon a task that is laid before the disciples, a task in which they will be empowered by Christ. John's account, however, offers us a subtly different perspective upon what is taking place, not least on account of its connection between the reception of the Spirit and the commission. In John's account, it is to the *personal correspondence* between Jesus' commission and that of his disciples that our attention is drawn.

John's account of Jesus' commission is focused upon the identity of Jesus as the personal revelation of the Father. All that Jesus does is merely a window into this deeper mystery of the incarnate Word's unique relationship to the Father. John presents us with the commission of the disciples within a corresponding framework. The disciples are to make known Jesus in the

same way as he made known the Father: not just as emissaries bearing his message, but as the embodied revelation of his person. The gift of Jesus' Spirit is that which equips them to be such a manifestation of his presence within the world. It will be as the disciples love one another in the peace of Jesus' Spirit that his presence will be made known in them and they will fulfil their commission.

When we consider our political task as Christians, it is common for a task-oriented account of witness to prevail over the Johannine vision I have outlined above. The Church can be reduced to a functional entity, committed to some combination of proselytization and social justice. The commission account of John pushes back against all such approaches. Stanley Hauerwas captures something of the Johannine message in his off-repeated dictum that 'the first social task of the church is to be the church,' something which in turn enables us to 'help the world understand itself as world.'

By giving us his Spirit, Jesus establishes the Church as the great sign of his presence and identity in the world. Our task, political and otherwise, starts and ends with our calling to live out this reality. As a communion of Spirit-empowered peace, love, and joy appears in the midst of a fearful and sin-shattered world, that world will encounter the wonder of the risen Christ the disciples experienced that first Easter Sunday. Seeing the light of the resurrection in the lives of believing disciples, it may also, like the once doubting Thomas, be brought to confess its Lord and God.

The Politics of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

The account of Pentecost in Acts is played out against a vast backdrop of scriptural history. Throughout the passage there are purposeful echoes of other narratives, Luke's literary artistry suggesting the significance that he ascribes to the events. Various commentators have alerted us to the striking parallels between Pentecost and Sinai. In both cases a leader ascends to God's presence in the cloud, receives a covenant-forming gift (the Law at Sinai and the Spirit at Pentecost), and, along with dramatic theophanic effects on a morning several weeks after Passover, bestows it upon the people. While 3,000 persons are slain at Sinai (Exodus 32:28), 3,000 people are 'cut to the heart' and repent at Pentecost (Acts 2:37, 41). Roger Stronstad argues that the epochal significance of Sinai—where Israel was constituted as a kingdom of priests and holy nation (Exodus 19:6)—is matched at Pentecost:

> [T]he creation of the disciples as a community of prophets is as epochal as the earlier creation of Israel as a kingdom of priests. That is, on the day of

> Pentecost, and for the second time in the history of his people, God is visiting his people on his holy mountain and mediating a new vocation for them—prophethood rather than royal priesthood.[45]

Others have found scriptural background in the story of Elisha's reception of the Spirit of Elijah following Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2. The placing of the prophetic Spirit of Moses upon the seventy elders of Israel in Numbers 11 appears to be relevant too, not least on account of Luke's employment of the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 (cf. Numbers 11:29). We are also probably supposed to see a vivid echo of the divine consecration of the tabernacle and temple (cf. Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11) in the descent of the Spirit, filling the house, and placing tongues of flame upon the assembly as if upon a lampstand.

Pentecost's presence within such a vast scriptural resonance chamber testifies to the profile that the event has within Lucan theology. Perhaps the most frequently identified background is that of Genesis 11. Genesis 11 tells of an immense building project, undertaken within the realm of the mighty empire-founder, Nimrod (Genesis 10:8-12). As Peter Leithart has observed, the building project had two dimensions to it—a city and a tower (Genesis 11:4)—and these two dimensions corresponded to the linguistic ('one language') and liturgical ('one lip')

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[45] Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), 53

unity of the people recorded in verse 1.[46] The tower is the religious heart of an empire that will dominate the earth. The great city and tower of Babel was an attempt to secure human power against the threat of divine judgment and establish the hegemony of Nimrod's empire upon the earth. YHWH frustrated the city and tower-builders by coming down and confusing their language, with the result that they were scattered abroad and their plan to establish a single world empire was abandoned.

In the chapter that follows, a new nation is formed as Abraham is called away from Ur of the Chaldees, the land of Babel. YHWH declares that, through Abraham, he will bless all of the nations of the world. In Zephaniah 3:9, God promises that He will restore to the peoples a pure 'lip', so that they may all call upon the name of the Lord. For Luke, Pentecost is a sign of the fulfilment of these promises.

Pentecost is a unification of the separated families of humanity. This unification isn't accomplished through the will and power of empires and their rulers, but through the sending of the Spirit of Christ, poured out like life-giving rain on the drought-ridden earth. In place of only one holy—Hebrew—tongue, the wonderful works of God are spoken in the languages and dialects of many peoples. The multitude of languages is preserved—a sign of the goodness of human diversity—and human unity is achieved, not in the dominance of a single human

[46] Peter Leithart, *Between Babel and Beast: America and Empires in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 5

empire, or in the collapsing of cultural difference, but in the joyful worship of God.

The Church is a Pentecostal symbol of human unification, a place where different ethnicities, nationalities, races, and people of various languages can be united as they are transcended in common worship. In the second century, Mathetes wrote of Christians in his epistle to Diognetus:

> For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life. Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign.

The Church created at Pentecost is a dramatic contrast to the project of Babel and all attempts to repeat it. Rather than gathering all together within an imposed

imperial uniformity and polity, the Church of Pentecost is scattered abroad, where it freely traverses all human differences with its message and identity. Dispersed throughout the world and its peoples, the unity of the Church represents God's achievement and prerogative against the hubris of empires. Present within all nations, yet belonging to none, God's worldwide kingdom cannot be contained, controlled, circumscribed, replicated, or assimilated by any other power.

As the people of Pentecost, our political vocation is to manifest the reality of God's worldwide kingdom, to be a place where the enmity between peoples is overcome and the many tongues of humanity freely unite in the worship of their Creator. Amidst the Babelic projects of the ages, the Church proclaims by its existence that the kingdom belongs to God, that there is no other true ruler over all the nations. As God's sovereignty is thus displayed, the vaunting empires of this world will be kept in their place.

The Politics of Making a Prophet

Acts 2:1-21

Many theologians have reflected upon the offices of prophet, priest, and king, especially in the context of the 'threefold office' (*munus triplex*) of Christ. While we frequently reference these three offices within our Christian discourse, often we do so without a clear sense of what each involves. In biblical literature, these three offices perform interlocking functions, have different realms of concern, and even have peculiar affinities with different bodies of literature or types of speech.

The priest was the palace servant of YHWH.[47] Priests guarded and maintained the regular operations of the sanctuary, but were also responsible for teaching and upholding the Torah to ensure the spiritual wellbeing of the wider 'house of Israel'. Kings were YHWH's vicegerents, ruling over the land and people as YHWH's representatives, a task requiring the development of wisdom. Prophets were members of the divine council, charged with relaying YHWH's judgments to his people

[47] Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 53-86

and their rulers and, increasingly, to the surrounding nations. In the biblical narrative, there is a development from an order that foregrounds priests and the Law (the Mosaic period), to one that foregrounds kings and wisdom (the Davidic period), to one that foregrounds prophets and the prophetic literature (the exilic and post-exilic periods). With this development came an expansion of the horizons of Israel's ministry, from a narrow focus upon the tabernacle, to the larger realm of the land, to the wider world of the empires within which Israel was situated.

Of the three figures, the prophet is arguably the one with the greatest scope of influence. The prophet has the words of YHWH placed in his or her mouth and is, like Jeremiah, appointed "over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."[48] The prophet advocates for the nation in the divine council and also addresses God's authority and truthful judgments to the powers and, in so doing, wields considerable power over them.

In Luke's account of the events of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, he alludes to various earlier prophetic traditions, representing the coming of the Spirit upon the Church as an event of prophetic installation or anointing. The previous chapter of Acts narrated the ascension of the risen Jesus to God's presence. The connection between ascension and Pentecost is a significant one. In 2 Kings 2, the prophet Elijah ascended to heaven and the mantle of his Spirit fell upon Elisha, empowering him to

[48] Jeremiah 1:10

complete Elijah's mission.[49] The Day of Pentecost is a homologous event, as the Church is anointed with the prophetic Spirit of Christ in order to complete the mission Christ began.

The parallels between the Day of Pentecost and the events at Sinai during the Exodus are manifold. The ascension of the anointed leader leads to a gift of new revelation and a reconstitution of the people. At Sinai, the people are established as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). While these themes are present in a more elevated form in Acts 2—the Church itself becomes the new temple—here it is the constitution of the people as a prophetic body that is especially striking.

In Numbers 11:16-30, YHWH took of the Spirit of Moses and empowered seventy elders of the people to exercise prophetic rule alongside him. As YHWH descended in the cloud and places the Spirit of Moses upon the seventy, they spontaneously began to prophesy in a remarkable but non-recurring manner (verse 25). The desire Moses expressed at that time—"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (verse 29b)—is alluded to in the promise of Joel 2:28-29:

> Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old

[49] Of the three tasks that YHWH entrusted Elijah with in 1 Kings 19:15-17, Elijah only performed one: the anointing of Jehu and Hazael were both performed by his successor, Elisha (2 Kings 8:9-15; 9:1-10).

men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter claims that this prophecy is arriving at its fulfilment (Acts 2:16-21). In the pouring out of the Spirit, a new prophetic people are being formed. As in Numbers 11, the Spirit of the leader of the people is distributed to others who will exercise gifted prophetic rule alongside him and, as in Numbers 11, the reception of the Spirit is accompanied by remarkable prophetic speech. At Pentecost the Spirit descends and rests upon the Church in a manner comparable to the descent and resting of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism.

Within the prophetic traditions, we witness a number of examples of prophetic installation events. These events are typically accompanied by theophanic phenomena—Moses' burning bush, Elijah's theophany at Horeb, Elisha's witnessing of Elijah's ascent, Isaiah's vision of YHWH's glory filling the temple, Jeremiah's vision of the hand of YHWH, Ezekiel's vision of the divine throne chariot, Jesus' theophany at his baptism. Pentecost is no exception. The sound as of a rushing mighty wind filling the house and the tongues as of fire—described in the same elliptical language that often accompanies a theophany (cf. Ezekiel 1)—are reminiscent of Isaiah's

temple vision in Isaiah 6.[50] The initiatory theophanic vision prepares the prophet for their mission in a number of ways, granting them strength and resources for their task (Exodus 4:15-17; 1 Kings 19:16; Isaiah 6:5-7; Ezekiel 2:2; 3:8-9; Acts 26:17), giving them a firm awareness of their personal vocation (Exodus 3:12; Ezekiel 3:16-21; Acts 26:16), and loosely sketching the contours of their mission (Exodus 3:10; 1 Kings 19:15-18; Isaiah 6:9-13; Ezekiel 3:4-9; Acts 26:17-18).

The appearance of non-consuming tongues of flame resting upon the heads of the disciples might recall the miraculous fire of the burning bush. Fire is an element associated with the Holy Spirit and his ministers (Psalm 104:4; Ezekiel 1:13-14). In being raised to participate in the divine council, prophets were elevated to share the status of the angels. The prophet operates within the element of the angels, possibly being transfigured (Exodus 34:29-35; Acts 6:15), appearing with them in the divine council, or moving rapidly and miraculously from place to place in the wind and fire of the divine throne chariot (2 Kings 2:11; Ezekiel 3:14; Acts 8:39).

YHWH's speech is like consuming flame (2 Samuel 22:9; Psalm 28:7; Isaiah 30:27; Jeremiah 23:29) and the mouth of the prophet has to be prepared and kindled to burn with the fire of God's word (cf. Jeremiah 5:14; Revelation 11:5; Sirach 48:1). In Isaiah 6:6-7, the mouth of the prophet is cleansed (and kindled?) with a live coal

[50] Some have suggested that the events of Acts 2:1-4 occurred in an upper room in the temple's outer courts (cf. Luke 24:53; Acts 1:13-14; 2:46; 3:11; 5:12).

from the altar. The connection between the tongues of flame and the tongues of speech (both γλωσσα) of Pentecost may draw upon this association: the Church is being lit as a witnessing lampstand and as burning mouthpieces of the divine word.

Acts 2 is arguably the generative core of the New Testament doctrine of the Church. Within the span of four verses, tightly packed with allusions, it establishes the Church as the new covenant recipient of the eschatological Spirit, the new temple and priesthood, the reversal of Babel, and also, as we have now demonstrated, the new prophetic community.

The role of the prophet, as I have defined it, is a deeply politically charged one. The prophet is a member of the divine ruling council, participating in its deliberations, and charged with playing the 'angelic' role of communicating its judgments to the powers of this world. The prophet is also often defined by suffering witness and frequent martyrdom. Luke's narrative identifies the Church as continuing the prophetic mission of Jesus, bearing the authorization and power of Jesus' Spirit, enjoying privileged access to the heavenly court, and delivering the judgments of God in Christ to kings and rulers. It should come as no surprise to us that the rest of the book of Acts is filled with confrontations and showdowns with various rulers and authorities.

It is, however, rare for the Church to display such a self-understanding of its status and vocation. The Church far too easily finds itself in thrall to the powers that be, weakly petitioning for a hearing in their halls, rather than confidently exercising its privilege of access to the

heavenly council. The Church too often addresses the rulers of this world with impotent bleats, rather than with the authoritative blast of the incendiary word of God. Reflection upon Pentecost calls us to return to the self-understanding that underlay the Church's earliest prophetic mission, a self-understanding that equipped it with the nerve to confront political powers, to face both suffering and death unflinchingly, and to overcome the world by faith in the One who is above all earthly rulers.

The Politics of the Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

Facing a threat to his safety, Paul was moved away from Berea by some of the believers (v.15). Paul was in Athens alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him. No longer a major population centre—the population of Athens in Paul's day was probably under 10,000—Athens still had considerable symbolic value on account of its continuing association with culture and learning.

Paul 'was deeply distressed' at the abundance of idols and images within the city. This reaction is a characteristically Jewish one: much that Paul says within this passage will reflect common Jewish polemics against idolatry. Consistent with the general pattern of his missionary work, Paul first focuses upon the synagogue, where he reasons daily with the Jews and with Gentile worshippers. He also speaks to the wider population within the marketplace.

Among the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who encounter him the accusation is made that he is a babbler (or 'seed-picker') and proclaimer of foreign gods. These

charges challenge both Paul's spiritual authority and the right of the religion that he proclaimed to a place within Athenian life. Some commentators have suggested that the second charge—that Paul proclaimed foreign gods—arose from the misconception that 'Resurrection' (*anastasis*) was a female deity alongside Jesus. This charge also recalls that made against Socrates, a strategic allusion and association that might serve Luke's apologetic ends.

Paul is brought to the Areopagus. Whether this was a situation resembling a formal trial or merely an attempt by a curious council to get a clearer understanding of Paul's teaching is unclear. The softened form of the challenge to Paul might suggest the latter. Robert Garland has argued that there were three criteria for the introduction of a new religion to the city of Athens: '(1) the sponsor must claim to represent a deity; (2) he must provide evidence that the deity is eager to reside in Athens; and (3) the deity's residence in Athens must benefit Athenians as a mark of its goodwill.'[51] In the speech that follows, Paul subversively addresses these conditions.

The manner of Paul's speech provides evidence of his scholarly training. His opening reference to the extreme religiousness of the Athenians has an ambiguity that he will proceed to exploit. As a reference to the piety of his audience it could be regarded as a shrewd attempt to create a favourable impression. However, through his reference to the altar of the unknown God, Paul paints a

[51] Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles* in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume X* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 245

picture of an excessive, superstitious piety. In the saturated market of Athenian idolatry, Paul identifies this monument to uninformed devotion as an object that epitomizes the religion of the city, a religion characteristic of the 'times of human ignorance' that he discusses in verse 30.

Paul declares the transcendence and sovereignty of God as the Creator of all things. This deity is related to all human beings and is involved in the life and destiny of the race. God's engagement in and ordering of humanity's life occurs in order that humanity might 'grope for him and find him.' Such a transcendent deity, who is reflected in humanity as his offspring, cannot appropriately be represented by inanimate idols of our own creation. Having introduced this transcendent, personal, providential active deity, intimately engaged in human affairs, Paul proclaims the end of the age of ignorance and groping in the darkness with the revelation of Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation and judgment.

The religious marketplace of the Athenians may seem rather remote from that of the more secular world which we inhabit. However, we can learn much from Paul's approach to the Athenians, particularly from Paul's initial move. As Tomáš Halík argues, 'the "altar to an unknown god" is precisely the most appropriate "topos" for proclaiming the Christian message.' He claims:

> I am convinced that if anyone wants to preach the Good News of the paradoxical God of the Bible, he has to find the "altar to an unknown god." To speak about Christ at the altar to familiar gods would be

> blasphemy or risk even greater misunderstanding than on that occasion at the Athenian Areopagus.[52]

In our society and most particularly in the realm of politics, God is experienced as the thoroughly known god, the god who holds no surprises. In a recent statement, the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron declared that we live in a 'Christian country'. This pronouncement, though welcomed in quarters, also excited appropriate concerns. In any comfortable alignment of Christianity and national heritage and identity, God is easily rendered familiar and unthreatening, a tame and mute idol to our patriotic values.

If anything, such civil religion is probably even more pronounced in the American political world, within which Christian values are routinely appealed to with the assurance that they align in all principal respects with a particular partisan agenda. 'God bless America' and 'in God we trust' can express the sort of divinely-sponsored patriotism that comforts through its rejection of any lingering uncertainty concerning God's support of the American project. The thoroughly known god underwrites the national project and identity: this is the entirely domesticated god, who stands with us against all that is foreign and unsettling.

As both right and left seek to tie the deity to their cultural identities or projects, we must join with Paul in proclaiming the transcendent God, who stands above and

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[52] Tomáš Halík, *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us* (London: Doubleday, 2009), 116

orders all human affairs. Sustaining and upholding us in existence, closer to us than closeness itself, this God eludes all attempts to reduce him to an object of our mastery. Like Paul, we must locate the interstices in the captive webs of our cultural idolatries, declaring the identity of our God from these points and calling all to account.

Paul's message at the Areopagus received a lukewarm response. His declaration of a God who lays claim to us in Jesus Christ—his revealed and appointed agent of blessing and judgment—cut entirely against the grain of speculative and superstitious religion. The listless Athenian preoccupation with hearing something new was answered with a demand for absolute commitment. The darkness of superstition was scattered by the dazzling light of divine revelation. The council desiring to cast judgment on a new religion found itself called to account before the bar of heaven. It is this same message that we are called to declare to the powers of our own age.

The Politics of Eschatological Imminence

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

The sense of eschatological imminence that we encounter in New Testament passages such as 1 Corinthians 7 has represented a nagging problem for many theologians. Indeed, the failed arrival of the expected *parousia* has been presented as an unsettling factor for the early Church, yielding sharp cognitive dissonance and provoking radical compensatory theological readjustment (analogous to that discussed by the social psychologist Leon Festinger in his book *When Prophecy Fails*). This non-arrival of the promised eschaton was the wound from which such things as an elevated ecclesiology developed as the cicatrix, sacramental presence substituting for apocalyptic arrival. Against the background of such interpretations of early Christian eschatology, passages such as ours can appear principally as embarrassing texts to be rationalized than as relevant words to be applied.

I believe that we would be mistaken were we to adopt such an approach, however. It is helpful here to recognize the difference between what Anthony Thiselton terms 'a

theology of eschatological imminence' and 'a *chronology* of eschatological imminence.'[53] While the latter operates in terms of a conviction that the absolute end of the cosmos is only months or years away, the former necessitates no such belief. Rather, the theology of eschatological imminence that we encounter in the New Testament arises chiefly from the combination of the 'apocalyptic judgment of the cross' and the inauguration of the new creation in the resurrection.[54] Life after these events is characterized by a radical relativization of the current world order and an intensified sense of its penultimacy. Henceforth, all human history occurs beneath the shadow of God's eschatological kingdom, which is also already at work in our midst. Our understanding of the true character of the nearness of the eschaton may be compromised by our modern reduction of all time to clock time.

A second helpful distinction is between 'participant logic' and 'observer logic'.[55] These two forms of logic relate to two different perspectives from which we may speak of the 'end of the world.' In the case of observer logic, the end of the world would refer to the final termination of the material and intersubjective cosmos. In the case of participant logic, however, the end of the world can refer to the catastrophic collapse of the established state of a particular society or person's

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[53] Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 578.

[54] *Ibid.* 583

[55] *Ibid.* 581, 583

historical existence. The destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in AD70 would have represented just such an event for many early Jewish Christians. Christians are among those facing a similar situation in Iraq and Syria in our own day.

In declaring in verse 29 that the appointed time has been shortened, Paul may refer to the way in which the cross and resurrection has brought the eschaton near to us in history. We now exist in a providential window of opportunity, graciously held open by God for us, which should heighten our sense of present urgency. Our sense of the theological imminence of the eschaton and of the penultimacy of the existing social and political order before it may also be elevated by specific historical threats or instabilities. Some commentators have suggested that the Corinthians that Paul addressed within this letter were facing just such a situation, provoked either by famine or severe persecution. In such a period of social ferment the proximity of the eschaton is acutely felt, its visage looming over the crumbling social order. In the context, however, Paul's concern seems to be less with preparing the Corinthians for the end of all things than with sparing them from the greater pressures and worries that would afflict those whose embeddedness in the collapsing order was exacerbated by marriage or many possessions.

It is within this context that Paul advances an ethic for life in the shadow of the eschaton. As the 'external structures of this world are slipping away,' we must learn

to occupy the world as those not preoccupied with it.[56] We engage with the world, but do not tie ourselves to it. While the slipping away of the external structures of our present world may not seem as immediate to us as it might have done to Paul's original addressees, their transience and penultimacy remains a fact of considerable importance.

Within the early Church we can often see a high sense of eschatological imminence and the shaping of ethical practice by this. The specific behaviour of the Christians in the city of Jerusalem is especially noteworthy on this front. Jesus had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the distress that would be faced by those invested in its order at that time, and the need to be prepared to flee. We do not have reason to believe that the practice of the Jerusalem believers in selling their land and houses, investing the money in the life and welfare of the Christian community, and having all things in common (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37) was the general behaviour of early churches. Rather, this was a form of prophetic praxis and practical preparation for the impending collapse of the external structures and institutions of second temple Judaism.

To some degree or other, all of us are invested in the current order of our world, in its political structures, and its economic and social institutions. Unfortunately, not only do we occupy these existing structures, we are all too often preoccupied with them, dulled to any sense of their impermanence in the face of God's inaugurated and

[56] *Ibid.* 585

coming kingdom. While the collapse of these structures may not be as imminent as the destruction of Jerusalem was for the first Christians, it is no less certain. The present form of our national and international politics is passing away. Like the nations and empires before them, our prevailing political powers and certainties will one day pass away, perhaps altogether beyond memory.

Paul never advocates a complete detachment and disengagement from the world—we still are those who 'deal with the world', who buy and sell, who mourn and rejoice. However, our participation in these activities is now tempered by Paul's radical 'as though'. No longer are these activities permitted to be the occluding preoccupations, defining features, or determinative realities of our existence. Rather we now undertake these activities as those belonging to the imminent eschatological kingdom of Christ, those whose existence is determined by its reality. We have been unplugged from the immediacy of our social reality and now engage with it as those who are no longer bound to it and identified by it.

Politics that does not conduct itself in the shadow of the inaugurated eschaton can never truly be Christian. Our hope cannot ultimately rest in current institutions or structures, as they will fail. A realization and conviction of the theological imminence of the eschaton will protect us from becoming engrossed in politics or too deeply invested in the present world order—'the external structures of this world are slipping away.'

On the other hand, Paul's ethic is shaped by a contrast between the things of this world and the things

that belong to the Lord, a distinction that comes into clearer focus in the verse after this week's lection. In being drawn out from our submersion in the present world order, we are plunged into the order of the eschatological kingdom. This is the truly determinative and ultimate reality. Our conviction of this that should become a distinguishing commitment of Christian political dealings in the present age, which can iconically present the penultimacy of current politics even within their own horizons.

The Politics of Representational Rule

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' Within this short statement, rewarding of attention in each of its constitutive elements, the Apostle Paul articulates a rich and finely poised vision of the Church as a community and polity.

The wider context of this claim concerns spiritual gifts, the various *charismata* exercised by members of the body of Christ. In the consecutive and parallel statements in the verses immediately preceding verse 7, Paul is concerned that the hearers of his letter recognize the threefold unity—'same Spirit' (verse 4); 'same Lord' (verse 5); 'same God' (verse 6)—that is at work within the diversity of gifts, forms of service, and activities respectively. Paul's use of a Trinitarian pattern at this point is striking.

Many theologians have sought to overcome a breach between, or hierarchy of, plurality and singularity, diversity and unity, the one and the many, yet the common observation that such a breach or hierarchy is

opposed in the thought of the New Testament is frequently employed to advance specific theological proposals that are far less felicitous. Perhaps some of the most egregious errors in this regard have arisen from the eager speculations of a social Trinitarianism, for which Nicholas Fedorov's phrase—'the dogma of the Trinity is our social program'—has been the guiding principle. As critics of this movement such as Karen Kilby and Steve Holmes have observed, this approach yields sharply contrasting ecclesiologies and politics when placed in the hands of John Zizioulas, Leonardo Boff, or Miroslav Volf. Holmes avers, 'the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is generative for ecclesiology and ethics is in danger of being cast into doubt if such wildly divergent implications can be drawn from the same doctrine.'[57]

Within our passage, Paul does not indulge in such speculations nor, despite the rich Trinitarian framing of his case, does he draw analogies between the Church and the Trinity. Nevertheless, his three parallel statements are not redundantly repetitious, as each one highlights a different dimension of unity within the phenomena that Paul is addressing. Although he resists a speculative analogy between God's nature and the Church, he provides an account of the Church's unity that is grounded in an implicit deep Trinitarianism—God's threefold mission in inseparable operation.

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[57] Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest For The Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012) 26.

The varieties of gifts correspond to the one Gift of the Spirit in verse 4. God has given the Church the one Gift of the Spirit and all spiritual gifts are given by God 'through' the Spirit (verses 8-11), as public 'manifestations' of the Spirit (verse 7). The unity here is not solely founded in their shared source in the one Giver, but also in the singularity of the Gift itself; the diverse forms of spiritual gifts all serve publicly to manifest the one Spirit. The Gift has been given to the entire body and each spiritual gift is a refractive disclosure and re-presentation of that single Gift.

As a counterpart to lordship—'same Lord'—are the variegated forms of service exercised by different ministers in verse 5. We are all the servants of the same Master and it is for our common service and his honour that our different gifts are all to be employed.

Finally, in verse 6, there are many activities, but the same God brings about everything.[58] In the building of the Church, the first and final mover is always God himself, working in and through us. He is behind all of our action—instigating it—within our action—empowering us—and before our action—rendering it effective.

Woven throughout the passage is an account of both unified and unifying divine action. The Spirit is given by God and is the one through whom God gives to form the body of Christ (verses 8-11). The Spirit of God bears witness to the Lordship of Christ (verse 3). All activity finds its origin and end in God (verse 6). Diverse spiritual

[58] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC] (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 933

gifts publicly manifest the shared Gift of the Spirit; differing ministries are devoted to the common service of our one Lord; varied operations are all brought about by God's effective working. As the Church and its members are caught up in something greater—the divine mission—they will become partakers in a divinely wrought unity.

The unity that Paul describes is not one clearly apparent to sight; it requires a spiritual act of recognition.[59] This act of recognition transforms both our perceptions of ourselves and of our spiritually gifted or office-holding brothers or sisters. In particular, Paul's approach involves a reconception of the other party: no longer am I to regard them as the private owner of some peculiar spiritual possession or privilege, nor as one enjoying office by virtue of some spiritual entitlement or individual expertise. Rather, I must learn to appreciate their gift as a re-presentation and 'manifestation' of the one Gift that has been given to all of us in the body of Christ, a re-presentation and manifestation that exists for the 'common good' (verse 7).

Conversely, Paul's teaching requires a transformation in the self-conception of spiritually gifted and ordained persons. Those with particular spiritual gifts must learn to perceive their exercise of those gifts as differentiated manifestations of the one Gift that has been given to us

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[59] I highly recommend Bernd Wannenwetsch's discussion of these themes within "'Members of One Another': Charis, Ministry and Representation" in *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, Al Wolters (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

all, to serve the benefit of everyone. Likewise, the office-bearer within a church must recognize themselves as re-presenting the one 'pre-structured' and unitary witness and service of the Church in an particular and institutionally structured manner.[60] Neither the spiritually gifted person nor the ordained minister create or establish a new reality: they present 'something which is already there'—the common Gift and ministry of the body as a whole. Bernd Wannenwetsch writes:

> The individual minister is but a personal reference to the presence of the charisma in the whole body. Were she the only one to have a particular charisma she could not re-present it. There would be no 're-', no presence to refer to apart from her own personal gift. So the minister is by her exercise of a charisma to others exactly witnessing to the commonality of the charisma.[61]

In arguing that specific gifts and ministers re-present the Gift and ministry that belongs to the body as a whole, Paul resists both radical egalitarian and hierarchical understandings of the Church. The differentiation of ministers is not the 'specialization' that underwrites the authority of modern expert individuals, but an 'ordination' whose authority arises from its political re-presentation of the one ministry and Gift that has been given to us all, and which is constantly tested according to

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[60] See Oliver O'Donovan's remarks in *ibid.* 222.
[61] *Ibid.* 212-213

its service of the common good. For such ministry to function effectively, it requires mutual recognition of our membership in one another and of our ministers' manifestation of that which belongs to us all, rather than merely of their own theological and homiletical expertise, spiritual charisma, or mere possession of the command belonging to their office. We must perceive ourselves as sharers in their ministry and they must perceive themselves as sharers with us in our reception of it.

Although the Church is *sui generis*, it is not without certain homologies with temporal political authorities. Paul's words here, addressed to the sectarian Corinthian church (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17), may resonate in significant ways in an American political context of which polarizing factionalism is an increasingly pronounced feature. This prevailing political climate often displays a failure of representation, as the defeat and subjugation of political adversaries becomes our governing obsession, as the popular recognition constitutive of true political authority is no longer generally forthcoming, or as the service of special interest groups and lobbyists eclipses the pursuit of the common good. The common good is easy to misplace in such an adversarial political system when the oppositional mode of disputation by which we ought to pursue the shared task of political deliberation calcifies into reactive antagonisms and sectarian animus, leaving us unheeding of prudence and opposed to compromise in our quest for the social dominance of our sides and ideologies.

Political office holders' vocation to serve and represent the common good pushes against the idea of the

immediacy of political authority, whether in personal charisma, expertise, or in pure command. Political representation must always be tested against the prior reality it is supposed to manifest or to which it must bear witness. In particular, as Wannenwetsch observes, 'acts of recognition of the people's sharing in the rule are equally essential for the way in which rulers exercise their special ministry,' for the rule they exercise is that of the people as a whole.[62] This social mediation of true political representation is often neglected, yet is expressed—and thereby participated within—by the Church in its prayers for our political leaders. This can effect a change in our mode of political participation and imagination as Christians. However our leaders may consider themselves, and whether or not they perform their vocation aright, in its own act of representation, the Church prays for them as ministers of God, charged to serve the common good of our whole society:

> Even in those times when Christians were deprived of the possibilities of civil engagement, as in places which are remote to modem democracy today, Christians have always participated in the ministerium politicum through their intercessions. Those prayers have been understood as a political action for the sake of the salus publica, and theologically as a representation in the strong sense: to stand before God, presenting the

[62] *Ibid*. 218

people, the rulers and the whole political society to God by commending them to his grace.[63]

While the unity of human polities is of another kind to the unity of the Church that Paul discusses in our passage, representation in rule and the recognition of rule are necessary for both. A Christian form of political participation can resist partisanship in its recognition of rule—even of leaders whose policies we might firmly oppose—and in its practice of 're-presentation' in prayer and its pursuit of it in action. Our representation of our societies and rulers to God repeatedly subjects and summons both to the searching yet non-partisan standard of God's will for our good in society together, while calling for God to bring about that good among us, a good which cannot be foreclosed by sectarian ideologies. Such a discipline can mould and inform our political imaginations, reducing their thrall to partisan causes and their constraining visions, while calling us to a practice that is more self-questioning and attentive to others, in place of our quests for ideological victory and vindication. In our commitment to recognize appropriately the modes of representative rule in our society and to petition for the common good over partisan or private gain, we uphold and propagate a healthy, open, and participatory vision of political society, one that has potential to relieve many of our political antagonisms and promote a more self-critical, yet less viciously sectarian, mode of political discourse.

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[63] *Ibid.* 219

The Politics of Transformed International Relations

Ephesians 2:11-22

New Testament passages such as this can be slightly perplexing to many readers. The close attention that the Apostle Paul gives to addressing categories of 'circumcised' and 'uncircumcised', 'Jew' and 'Gentile', can seem foreign to us, belonging to a way of ordering the world and its peoples that has long since passed. Furthermore, why such categories should have any bearing upon or relevance to the operations of God's grace is unclear. After this passage, Paul proceeds to argue that he has been entrusted with the revelation of a great mystery hidden in ages past, which has since been revealed, the mystery that 'the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.'[64] If this is the great mystery that the world has been waiting for, something about it seems anticlimactic. From our vantage point the revelation can seem like a damp squib.

[64] Ephesians 3:6

I suspect that much of our struggle to appreciate the significance of the mystery arises from our failure to recognize the centrality and character of the Church in Paul's understanding of salvation. For Paul, the formation of the Church—as a concrete historical polity—is not a sideshow in his account of Christ's work, but is a central feature.

In verses 11-12, Paul calls upon the Ephesians to 'remember' their former state: that of uncircumcised Gentiles, 'aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.' As Stephen Fowl highlights, the designation 'Gentile' only made sense 'within Judaism or in relation to Judaism.'[65] Within these verses, Paul is calling upon the Ephesians to reconceive their past, to regard their former identities in a manner that is only possible from an 'in Christ' vantage point. The retrospective nature of this characterization is noteworthy: few non-Jews would have naturally considered themselves to be 'without hope and without God in the world' or thought of themselves as alienated. Fowl writes:

> This act of remembering their past as a Gentile past has a dual function. First, by recalling their state as Gentiles before God, the Ephesians can come to see themselves in the very particular ways in which God saw them.... It is equally important, however, that by

[65] Stephen Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 85.

> remembering their past as a Gentile past, a past that is thereby in relation (albeit a negative one) to Judaism, Paul can begin to describe more precisely the nature of the reconciliation accomplished in Christ. In fact, if Christians fail to grasp this, they may end up misperceiving what is involved in reconciliation today.[66]

In the process of describing the Ephesians' former identity, Paul also unsettles Jewish categories. The word 'called' preceding both 'the uncircumcision' and 'the circumcision' suggests that Paul questions the legitimacy or significance of this designation, an impression bolstered by the clause that follows: 'a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands.' 'Made … by human hands' is elsewhere used of pagan idols or shrines (Daniel 5:4 lxx; Acts 17:24), demonstrating their insufficiency to accommodate or represent God. It is also used in reference to the Jerusalem temple (Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48; Hebrews 9:11, 24), where it draws attention to the transitory character of the edifice.[67] Likewise, the term 'flesh' in Paul is typically contrasted with the Spirit and its efficacy in the new covenant. In signalling his contestation of these Jewish categories, Paul is probably subtly directing the attention of the hearers of the letter to the more determinative circumcision of the heart by the Spirit promised in the new covenant.

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[66] *Ibid*. 88-89

[67] *Ibid*. 86

Paul declares that the Gentiles who once were alienated are brought near through the blood of Christ in verse 13. Some hearing Paul's argument to this point might be wrong-footed by their expectation that the Gentiles will have been 'brought near' by being made members of Israel. They are brought near, however, not by being made members of Israel, but by becoming members of an entirely new polity—the Church.

From writing of bringing alienated parties near, Paul turns to address the removal of a barrier between separated people groups. Elsewhere Paul speaks of the Torah as placing Israel under condemnation; here the Torah is something that holds Jews and Gentiles apart, the charter of Israel's identity that excludes Gentiles. The death of Christ overcomes not only the condemnation that Israel lies under but also the division within the human race. In Christ, the quarantining of Israel from the nations has ended and one new undivided humanity can be formed of the two. This reconciliation of the divided humanity is accomplished as *both* Gentiles and Jews are reconciled to God (verse 16), enjoying 'access in one Spirit to the Father' (verse 18). The human race is united as it draws near to God.

Paul describes the state of the Ephesians following the work of Christ in verses 19-23. They are no longer 'strangers and aliens' but are full members of the household of God, with all of God's other holy people. Paul infuses his architectural imagery with organic language: we are a structure that is joined together, which is 'growing' into a holy temple for God's dwelling place.

Verses 21-22 are parallel to 4:15-16 of the epistle, where Paul writes:

> But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Here the accent is upon the organic rather than the architectural imagery, but the parallel is illuminating. The notion of a living and growing temple 'body' is not exclusive to Paul, but can be found in other New Testament passages such as John 2:19-21 and 1 Peter 2:5, and is implicit in the imagery of Acts 2. This temple, this building in which Jew and Gentile are brought together in fellowship with God, is built up in conformity to Christ, through acts of communication—'speaking the truth in love'—and acts of loving mutual service.

It is this international body of persons that is the temple within which God now dwells, a claim that is absolute integral to Paul's understanding of the Christian message. Essential to the progress of the building project is the establishment of loving communication and service between Jews and Gentiles. Even with the wall of division between them removed, the edifice of the new temple would risk being riven in twain by a huge crack were such bonds between Jews and Gentiles not formed and maintained. This is one reason why Paul expresses such passionate concern about the situation in Antioch he

recounts in Galatians 2, where Jews withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles. The eschatological temple is a feat of international relations springing out of the overflowing grace of the gospel.

As contemporary Christians reading these passages, we can fumble for conceptual rationales for the intensity of Paul's concern to hold Jews and Gentiles together. The principles that most readily present themselves to the consciousness of readers informed by the tradition of Western liberalism are typically those of inclusivity, equality, and non-discrimination, yet these principles have seldom fuelled quite such an intense impulse towards the concrete outworking of *unity* between people groups as Paul displays in his epistles. They also more typical draw our attention to individuals rather than to concrete historical communities of people.

In focusing upon these categories we risk missing the character of Paul's concerns and understanding. Paul's point has less to do with an abstract principle of the equality of *individuals* and much more to do with the overcoming of divisions between *peoples* within the arena of history. The 'oneness' he declares is not primarily a rejection of the significance of the difference between Jews and Gentiles—note the careful choreography of his chosen pronouns in chapter 2—but his insistence that difference no longer presents a division or obstacle, having been traversed by the grace of Christ's gospel. Likewise, the unity he proclaims doesn't straightforwardly underwrite liberal values of inclusivity and non-discrimination. The inclusion and non-discrimination that Paul proclaims is not founded upon absolute moral

principle, but upon a historical achievement. It is a unity that is brought forth from a prior situation of divinely-established exclusion and discrimination: God had elected Israel and the Gentiles were excluded. The mystery is that God's purpose was that this 'discrimination' and 'exclusion' should one day serve the blessing of all.

The difference between Jews and Gentiles established by the Torah is of great importance to Paul, although he presents this difference in terms of its *penultimacy* to the new covenant order of the Church. The significance given to the difference between those who were aliens and strangers and those who were citizens and members of the household, between those who were near and those who were afar off, is a reminder that the Church is not a polity founded upon timeless abstract principles, but one forged through God's decisive action with distinct peoples in history.

The relevance of Paul's understanding of the gospel for political theology is immense. More than just the equality of all individuals before God, the Church is the concrete establishment of a new international body, within which old oppositions are overcome through divine reconciliation and loving communication. Differences are not necessarily expunged—love and grace are particularizing and address us in our uniqueness—but the divisions they once established are traversed by the working of grace. Were we to recognize the centrality of the overcoming of human division and grace's traversal of all differences in Paul's understanding of the gospel—were we to practice it in our communities—the *political* force of

the Christian faith would become clearly evident. As the new organic human temple is built up, it is a light to the world, a pattern of how things really ought to be, a foretaste of the eschaton, where the nations give up the ways of war and join together as one to feast at God's table.

The Politics of Privilege

Philippians 3:4a-14

In a popular reading of these verses of Philippians, Paul was once the stereotypical Pelagian, believing that he could earn God's favour through his ethical exertion. After his Damascene encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul came to the awareness that his own righteousness—i.e. his moral effort—was insufficient and that, instead of trusting in his own good works, he should trust in the perfect divine righteousness of Christ instead.

This reading is a compelling one in many respects. It seems to make *prima facie* sense of the passage and, more importantly, it articulates a deeply Christian logic, a truth that has proved liberating for countless persons over the centuries, declaring the fact of God's free acceptance of us in his Son. On closer examination, however, cracks start to appear.

One of the first things that might trouble the reader holding this interpretation is that, of the things that Paul formerly counted 'gain', most of them do not actually have to do with his own works. Rather, they describe advantages that Paul enjoyed purely by virtue of his birth or ancestry. Whatever we might say about his later Torah-

observance and zeal, being circumcised on the eighth day, being an Israelite, being a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and having impeccable Hebrew pedigree were largely accidents of Paul's birth, unrelated to anything that he himself had done.

Instead of serving as signs of moral attainment, these biographical details were indicators of covenant status, signs that Paul was situated—or so he once thought—on the inside track of God's purposes. We need not, of course, just switch from a reading focusing entirely upon performance to one that speaks only of status: both are present. However, matters come into clearer focus when we understand the sort of identity that Paul once boasted in, not least because similar genres of identities continue to exert a powerful force in our own world.

If the identity that Paul is describing here is not that of the classic legalist, what is it? I believe that an analogous sort of identity could be found in the patriot. Paul wasn't that unlike the patriot who takes pride in the fact that he is a *true* American (as opposed to all of those unwelcome immigrants). *His* family's presence on American soil dates back to the Mayflower. His forefathers fought for their country. From as early as he can remember, he has been steeped in American culture. He has a large stars and stripes flying outside of his house and a wall devoted to portraits of the presidents within. He is a hard worker who is living his own American dream, attending church twice a week, and putting money back into his community. He only buys American products, he devotes himself to studying American history, and has always been politically involved and

invested in the wellbeing of the nation. The 'performance' of such a patriot isn't undertaken to 'earn' American status, but to demonstrate and broadcast his claims to it, to mark him out from those who aren't Americans (or are 'lesser' Americans), and more fully to ground and celebrate his sense of identity in it.

The roots of Paul's former identity lay in the Torah, Israel's covenant charter and Declaration of Independence. As Paul committed himself to the Torah and its way of life, he was showing himself to be a true Israelite. The 'flesh' which he speaks of probably refers to something broader than sinful human nature alone, encompassing also the familial and social network to which persons belong.

Paul's attitude towards this status is striking. He now regards it as dung and loss for the sake of Christ. For the sake of Christ, Paul suffers the loss of all things, surrendering them so that he might be found in Christ. Rather than the status that he once so highly valued, Paul now wishes to pursue the status of being in Christ, a status that entails being conformed to Christ's death in order to share in his resurrection.

When we step back and look at the picture that emerges, analogies between Paul's account of his own story and that of Christ's humility in taking the form of a servant in chapter 2 of Philippians appear in sharp relief. Both Paul and Christ enjoyed a privileged status and both regarded that status as something that they would not take advantage of, giving up privilege for the sake of service and the way of the cross. Being conformed to Christ entails sharing the shape of his story, refusing to

aggrandize ourselves in our privileged statuses, abandoning former privileges, and following the path of service instead.

It is at this point that the significance of the analogy between the identity that Paul describes and our various privileged forms of status should become apparent to us. Although Paul the legalist trying to earn his own salvation may not strike so close to home to us, Paul the privileged person who is called to adopt an entirely new posture towards his privilege may prove to be uncomfortably so.

Privilege is a powerful reality in our social, civic, and political life. As our eyes are opened to its dynamics (a good sign of being privileged is that we generally don't have to think about it), we can see the effects of privilege and the perspectives that typically accompany it in every area of our existence. Whether the privileges in question arise from race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, class, education, age, physical ability, or some other factor or combination of factors, we need to become aware of the advantages that we enjoy over others, often merely by virtue of the accident of birth. These are all ways in which we habitually take confidence in the flesh, being assured that we will be given a hearing, that we will fit in, that we will enjoy security and safety, that we won't suffer lack.

Reading Paul's account is a challenge to the privileged—a challenge to *us*. It is a challenge to discover what it might mean for us to conform *our* relationship to *our* privilege to that of Christ. As in the case of Paul and Christ, our privilege may not be something that we can simply give up—Paul never ceased to have a privileged

Jewish background and Christ never ceased to have the privilege of equality with God. However, being conformed to Christ entails a radical transformation in our attitude towards and exercise of our privilege.

Like Paul, we are called to recognize our privilege, the ways that we are accustomed to taking confidence in the flesh. And then, rather than boasting in and pursuing this confidence, we are to become servants like our Master, taking the path of the cross. What does being conformed to Christ look like for someone possessing our privilege? Living out the answer to this question is our Christian vocation.

The Politics of Christ, the Beginning

Colossians 1:15-28

This week's epistle reading opens with a dazzling paean of praise. Its surpassing radiance passing through a literary prism, the variegated splendour of the Son is displayed in each of its key facets.

N.T. Wright, developing an argument from C.F. Burney, suggests that the poem unpacks the various possible meanings of the Hebrew term *bereshith*, the term with which the book of Genesis—and the Scripture as a whole—begins.[68] This term enjoys added significance by virtue of the implied identification of *reshith* with Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22. Wright summarizes the poem's development of its *bereshith* theme as follows:

1. (15a) He is the image [like Wisdom herself, and evoking Gen 1.26]
2. (15c) He is the firstborn [like Wisdom herself: the first meaning of *reshith*]

[68] N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 1991) 111-112.

3. (17ab) He is supreme (προ πάντων) [the second meaning of *reshith*]
4. (18a) He is the head [the third meaning of *reshith*]
5. (18c) He is the beginning [the fourth, and climactic, meaning of *reshith*]
6. (18d) He is the firstborn—this time from the dead [like Wisdom again, but now firmly as a human being][69]

The *be* of *bereshith* is also explored in each of its principal aspects—'in him', 'through him', 'to him' (verses 16, 19-20). In its unpacking of the term *bereshith*, its reference to the image of God, and in its expansive cosmic sweep, Colossians 1:15-20 evokes the creation account and situates the Son at the heart of its meaning.

Christ, the Son, is the firstborn and archetypal Image of God, the one who represents and symbolizes God's rule in his world. He is the one in whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created. Whatever has been created—'all things in heaven and on earth ... things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers'—exists on account of him and for his sake. He is supreme over all, enjoying the prominence and priority of the head, the source and the first principle of all things.

Implicit in this poem is a rereading of the opening chapters of Genesis. Veiled in the very language of Genesis 1, Paul discovers the incomparable majesty of the risen Christ, the one who has always been there, yet has

[69] *Ibid.*

only now in the fullness of time been disclosed. Within this triumphant poem, one of the most fundamental and familiar scriptural passages of all reveals a transfigured aspect, as from its words the light of the glory of Christ shines forth.

The prominence and glory of the firstborn Son is revealed through his great act of reconciliation, with which the second half (verses 18c-20) of the bipartite poem is concerned. Christ's status as the firstborn in creation is reaffirmed and secured in his status in its redemption as the firstborn from the dead, whereby the once-alienated creation is restored to its rightful ruler, heir, and source.

The Christology of Colossians 1:15-20 is an incredibly high one. Christ is presented as integral to the origin, constitution, and destiny of God's creation in a manner that implies his divine identity in a striking and powerful manner.

Indeed, the very weight placed upon prepositions—'in', 'by', 'for', 'through'—in assigning the single act of creation to Christ might hint at some proto-Trinitarian account of inseparable operations and appropriation. Christ's activity and place in creation is divine yet personally distinct. The entirety of the unitary act of creation—both bringing it into and sustaining it within being—is related to his agency, yet in a particular way (one roughly hinted at in the specific prepositions employed) consistent with the assignation of the entire act to the Father in another. The same creative action constantly arises from the origination ('from') of the Father, the establishing and upholding of the Son, and the animation and perfecting of the Spirit.

Colossians 1:15-20 is a stunning articulation of a Christological monotheism; the one God—the Creator above all creation—is known in the Son. The intensity of the Creator's authority is concentrated in him and the cosmic scope of the poem corresponds to this: if Christ's role in the creation is as the poem describes it, there is nothing that falls outside of his authority.

Although the political force and implications of such a statement may be apparent, we do not have to make them explicit ourselves, for they are already prominent in the passage itself. Verse 16 declares that all 'thrones or dominions or rulers or powers … have been created through him and for him.' Implied in verse 20 is the fact that all such authorities are reconciled to God by Christ and his cross.

Political theology faces a continual danger of forgetting the kerygmatic core of our faith: Jesus is Lord. Just as the Son is the firstborn over all creation, supreme in all things, summing up all in himself, the head, the beginning, the source and the purpose of everything, and the reconciler and ruler of the cosmos, so this gospel declaration must provide the starting point for all Christian political thought and reflection.

Without such a starting point, political theology ceases to be truly *evangelical*—that is, it abandons the authoritative gospel proclamation that should provide its heart. While we may still be gifted political ethicists, we will have lost sight of the uniqueness of the one who is the Beginning and abandoned the foundational Christian truth.

Just as Paul argues in the verses following this poem in our passage, the heart of the Christian message is not some teaching that Christ taught, nor some moral example that he set—important though both of these things are—but Christ himself and the unique work he has done.

'It is he whom we proclaim'—it is the uniqueness of Christ and his status within the creation that grounds the absolute authority of his message and example. Only with him as our starting point will everything else come into focus.

Who is the image
of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
for in him all things were created
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible things,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or powers—
all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things.

And in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church;

Who is the beginning,
firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
by making peace through the blood of his cross,
through him, whether the things on earth or the things in heaven.

The Politics of Continual Thanksgiving

Colossians 3:12-17

Paul accords great importance and prominence to gratitude and thanksgiving in this charge to the Colossian Christians—'be thankful' (εὐχάριστος—v.15); 'with gratitude in your hearts' (χάρις—v.16); 'giving thanks to God the Father' (εὐχαριστέω—v.17).[70] Earlier, he charges them to 'forgive each other' (χαρίζομαι—v.13), just as Christ forgave them. God's forgiving provides the impetus for our own forgiving, and his abundant giving is answered with our joyful thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is to be absolutely integral to the Colossian Christians' lives, characterizing 'whatever' they do, whether 'in word or deed'.

The significance given to thanksgiving and gratitude at key points within the New Testament is such that it is presented as a central manner in which the telos of sacrifice is realized within the Church. Even after declaring the old covenant sacrificial system redundant, the author of the book of Hebrews exhorts his readers

[70] See also Colossians 2:7 and 4:2.

'continually' to offer a 'sacrifice of praise' (Hebrews 13:15), most likely adopting the language of the Septuagint of Leviticus 7:15 and Psalm 116:17, which refer to the peace offering for thanksgiving (וֹדָה֥ת) in the same terms (θυσία αἰνέσεως).[71] From the earliest years of the Church, the term 'Eucharist' ('thanksgiving') was adopted to refer to the Lord's Supper (*Didache* 9:1). While the old covenant involved a continual (twice daily) burnt offering (Exodus 29:39, 42) and tribute offering (Leviticus 6:20; Numbers 4:16), the new covenant is distinguished by its 'continual' thanksgiving offering—its perpetual Eucharist.[72] At the time of the reign of David, Levitical song was ritually coordinated with the sacrifices of the tabernacle/temple, and came to bear a sacrificial meaning.[73] The singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God that Paul encourages in verse 16 is a continuation of this sacrificial meaning, the offering of the 'fruit of lips' (Hebrews 13:15; cf. Hosea 14:2).[74] Both sacramentally and more generally, thanksgiving is a defining practice of the Church.

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[71] The natural affinity that this peace offering—the only animal sacrifice that required the offering of bread with the animal (Leviticus 7:12-13), bread given to the priest—has with the Eucharist is suggestive.

[72] Peter J. Leithart, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 71.

[73] Peter J. Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003).

[74] Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 48ff.

To some, this defining Christian practice of thanksgiving may appear to be rather unpromising as a source of political challenge. Indeed, it may be at such points that the force of Marx's designation of religion as the 'opium of the people' makes itself felt: continual thanksgiving prevents us from articulating and addressing our suffering and keeps us compliant with powers that bind us. Yet, as Peter Leithart observes in his recent book, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*, the Christian approach to gratitude is profoundly subversive, especially within patronage cultures where political and social advancement and dominance arise in large measure through unilateral impositions of obligation and the gaining of honour by means of gift-giving.

Within the first century world, the New Testament's teaching concerning gift-giving and reception was a threatening one, not least in how persistent it was in directing thanksgiving to God over all others. This determined rendering of thanks to God undermined the leverage of the powerfully obliging reciprocities that dominated social life and the hierarchies that they produced and sustained. It made possible the 'ingratitude' of departing from tradition, of leaving father and mother to follow Christ, and of reneging on the imposed social debts by which patrons and powerful 'benefactors' secured their power; by firmly directing gratitude to God it resisted the supposed entitlement of the wealthy to employ God's gifts to them as means of accruing power by imposing debts upon others. The new form of gift economy established by Christ and the apostles led to the eschewing of honour competitions, to releasing others

from debt, and to the replacement of the vicious asymmetries of hierarchical patron-client gift relations with those of mutual patronage.

Leithart remarks upon the Apostle Paul's own practice of thanksgiving in his letters, and the manner in which it demonstrates the distinctive character of resolutely God-directed gratitude. Paul's expressions of thanksgiving in his letters, he observes, are 'offered almost exclusively to God alone' and Paul offers such thanks for benefits received by others no less than for those he has received himself.[75] Perhaps most startling to his contemporaries' ears would the way in which he responded to gifts given to him, not least when he expresses his appreciation for the support of the Philippians in the words 'I thank my God for your remembrance of me,' in reference to their support of him in his ministry (Philippians 1:3-5). Leithart remarks:

> By Greco-Roman standards, it is not adequate thanks. Paul was the one who received, the Philippians the ones who gave, and yet Paul's thanks are offered to a third party, the Father, the patron of both Philippians and apostles. Paul acts as if their gift was not directed to him at all; he calls it a sacrifice whose fragrant aroma is well pleasing to God.[76]

Paul doesn't employ the language or perform the cultural courtesies associated with indebtedness. Rather

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[75] *Gratitude*, 73

[76] *Ibid.*

than placing Paul in the Philippians' debt, their gift is a token of their communion with him in his gospel ministry. Paul nowhere expresses an expectation or obligation to repay them, but directs their attention to God, their common Benefactor, who acts as the guarantor of any debt Paul might incur: 'And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:19).

> In the community of Jesus, the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed for rather than to benefactors. Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers; they do not owe return payment. Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries; they cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients.[77]

The Church's continual practice of thanksgiving cultivates a well-directed sense of gratitude, which has liberating political potential. When we repeatedly recognize and honour our great divine Benefactor as the ultimate generous giver of every good and perfect gift, whatever hands we may have received them from, the power of lesser benefactors to wield control over us by their 'gifts' is considerably weakened, as they can no longer command the sort of gratitude and obligations that belong to God alone. The economy of gift ceases to be an engine of hierarchy and social inequality when our thanks and obligation for all gifts is ultimately seen to belong to

[77] *Ibid.* 74

God alone. All others are, at best, channels of and participants in God's act of giving.

Furthermore, when God is understood to be the guarantor of debts, giving to the poor can be regarded as a matter of 'lending to the Lord' (Proverbs 19:17). Rather than indebting the recipients of charity to the givers, it frees both to engage in the transaction, trusting that repayment would be provided by a third party. As John Barclay suggests, the conviction that God would repay those who gave to the poor was complemented by the agency afforded to the recipient of charity in blessing the giver (Deuteronomy 24:13), or seeking recompense against the uncharitable (Deuteronomy 24:14-15).[78] In such a manner, the hierarchy of the cultural form of patronage was replaced by a mutual patronage, one reinforced by the Christian teaching that the one Gift of the Spirit was re-presented in the many spiritual gifts of the members of the body of Christ.[79] Such a practice of gift can produce the loving unity that Paul calls for in these verses, disarming the logic that drives antagonism and hostile competition.

The forgiveness at the heart of the gospel is a proclamation of a release from debts, a release that Paul enjoins the Colossians to spread to others in verse 13. Just as God doesn't charge our sins against us, so we are to hand over the tallies of the debts that others owe us to him, demanding neither recompense nor repayment from

[78] John M.G. Barclay, *Paul & the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 44.
[79] *Gratitude*, 76

their hands. Once again, God's giving and forgiving is the reality around which our social relations must be ordered. Our continual recalling of this reality in the act of Christian thanksgiving is a recurring disclosure and reapplication of its reorienting potential.

The continual practice and discipline of Christian thanksgiving remains a politically subversive act. Forgiven and thankful people who are trained to owe no one anything except to love one another (Romans 13:8) are hard to enslave, whether through guilt or through indebtedness. Such persons live as those ultimately beholden to God alone. Our continual thanksgiving to God acquaints us with the limits of the obligations others can place upon us by gifts that they themselves have received from God's hands. Trust in God as the guarantor of all debts frees us from seeking vengeance, frees us to give to those who cannot repay, and frees us to release others from their indebtedness. Far from leading to political impotence or quietism, restoring the centrality of heartfelt and joyful thanksgiving to God within the life of the Church may prove to be among the most important political activities to which we could commit ourselves.

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