

Epiphany 4, 2017

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

Romans 13.1

Difficult days indeed for us, as we hear St Paul’s words to us today: what on earth are we to make of his injunction “be subject to the governing authorities”? The Israelites found it no easier than we do: God gave them Judges, to lead and govern them, under His own sovereign reign. But the Israelites were disobedient and rejected this arrangement, wanting instead a mortal king, like everyone else had in those days. It took them a long time to realize that the substitution of a human being for God is the road to perdition. It is no different for us today: there is, for all of us in different ways, a temptation to place one other than God on the throne of our hearts. In this country, this United Kingdom, we have a Queen. But, thank God, she makes it very clear under whose authority she rules, and to whom she is accountable. Human authority, rulers, the place in which power and authority is vested: these are some of the great questions that human beings have wrestled with since time began. Solutions have come and gone: the flaws of a new system often becomes painfully evident early on, from the France of Robespierre to the Soviet Union of Stalin.

2016 has been a tumultuous year in respect of this vexed and complex question of how we should order our common life under God: Prime Ministers and Presidents have come and gone; great constitutional questions have been grappled with at home and abroad; the Middle East tragically becomes less and less stable and secure before our very eyes. Brexit and Trump are, of course, two of the big headlines, and meanwhile the Church of England continues to tackle some of the big questions in ways that cause great hurt and distress to some of her number. What would God have us do? How should our common life be ordered if it is ordered by God? What should it look like?

Donald Trump, Brexit, Israel/Palestine, Scottish independence, Northern Ireland, same-sex marriage (in church or out of it), the appointment of women as priests and bishops: these are just a few of the divisive issues of the day. I imagine that most of us have clear convictions about some of these

questions, even if we are agnostic about others. I suspect that I am not alone in knowing and respecting people on both sides of each of these debates.

This morning’s Gospel describes a great storm on the sea; the boat is being swamped by the waves, and the Lord is asleep. There has been great turbulence in public life, at home and abroad, in recent months. It has seemed that the waves might indeed overwhelm us. As I have reflected on many conversations on these topics in the last months, it has occurred to me that most of us have had the shared experience of waking up, rubbing our eyes and saying words to the effect of: “the world and the Church of which I am a part is not what I thought it was: I find myself at sea. How did this happen?”

Whatever our convictions about any or all of the current debates, I am sure of this: that on each side of every one of these debates, we will find decent, humane, intelligent, God-fearing people. And that’s hard, because it means we cannot simply dismiss those with whom we disagree as bigots or fools or as being somehow intellectually or morally defective. And here’s an interesting thought: in this church, Sunday by Sunday, as we gather together to worship and pray, to hear God’s holy word and to be fed with his Holy Sacrament, within our number there are people on all sides of these current debates. You or I might be kneeling next to one at the altar rail. And this gives me great cause for hope. We have been called to live and serve together, and not just with a bunch of carefully-selected people who believe the same as we do about these issues: but certainly with a bunch of people who believe that God loved us so much that he sent his only son to save us.

It is remarkable and wonderful that God gathers together, for his loving purposes, a disparate, gifted, faithful and richly-mixed bunch of us, aged 0-90+ years, from all parts of the world: to be assembled and fashioned as his people, under his sovereign rule, to witness to his love in the darkness of this present world. We each have our part to play, that he has entrusted to us and to no one else, in being part of his body, in bearing with one another and so bearing the light of his love with us into the world, week by week. We won’t get it all right, of course we won’t, but I hope we’ll give it a jolly good shot, and grow in love and understanding and, most importantly in his likeness as we do so. God’s world needs us to do this. Amen.