

Keeping Jesus out of politics - but viewing politics with Jesus' eyes

"I think we should be teaching our youngsters the difference between morality and merely keeping the rules." So said one of the St Hilda's Guides leaders. This was a pertinent response to the mess MPs had got themselves into as the parliamentary expenses scandal erupted last month.

Up and down the country, in pubs, on buses, at workplaces, in dole queues, on golf courses and even in churches, our politicians' extraordinary claims for reimbursement at the tax-payers' expense was a rich topic of debate. And there was good reason.

It was interesting to note how initially the politicians reacted to the newspaper revelations of their exorbitant expenses claims by saying: "We know, it looks bad, but we were only keeping to the rules." It took a few more days of revelations for those same politicians to finally come out and say: "We know, it is bad. The rules need changing." The first response smacked of denial and hiding behind some dodgy rules. The second sounded more like repentance and the discovery of a conscience that over-ruled the rules (though, of course, this change of heart was also likely to have been politically motivated).

Human beings don't like rule-makers who go on to bend those rules to their advantage or then hide behind those selfsame rules. The same was true in Jesus' day. How Jesus raged against those who placed heavy burdens on the poor and devout but would not lift a finger to help them (Matthew 23.4).

So why is the vicar getting on his political soapbox, you might be asking? Isn't there a rule about keeping politics out of the pulpit? Well there might be. But it is a rule that also needs challenging. For politics at its best is about the working out of truth and justice and mercy - all of which are in short supply in our public arenas today. When was the last time you heard a merciful word about a social worker or a council official or a politician, for that matter?

But the main reason I am getting on my political soapbox is to warn that we live in surprisingly dangerous times, politically. Not because of the threat of terrorism (which is real) or climate change (which already affecting poorer communities) but because of the dangers of extremism lurking on the edges of political life. And our current crop of politicians at Westminster, with a few honourable exceptions, are damaging the body politic in such a way as to drive many of our neighbours and friends, who are fed up with the lot of them, into the arms of more extremist political outfits. These outfits are already hard at work recruiting in our neighbourhoods, building up relationships and giving credence to a new morality and new rule book.

Like many Christians in this country, I resent the way in which one political party, the British National Party, has decided to use our Lord Jesus Christ as if he was a recruiting sergeant for their cause. In its publicity for the European Elections (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7978981.stm>), the BNP suggest that they, like Jesus, were persecuted, for doing right (quoting John 15.20) - and then ask: "What would Jesus do?" They then go on to suggest: "Vote BNP." Their rationale - that they are the only party defending Britain as a 'Christian Country'.

Five years' ago, the then Bishop of Birmingham, John Sentamu, sent out an uncompromising message to the community when he warned that a vote for the BNP was akin to 'spitting in the face of God'. A vote for the BNP is also like spitting in your neighbour's face. Any reading of the gospel - and the effect that Jesus had on the lives of his followers - will tell you that Jesus stood for justice, mercy and peace and raged against bigotry, hypocrisy and any attempt to strip human beings of dignity.

Take Jesus out of politics, maybe! But look at politics with the eyes of Jesus as you cast your vote on June 4th. There is a real danger that too many people who long for more grace, mercy and peace in our public lives will stay away from the polls because they are so de-spirited by our fallible politicians. But this could serve merely to let in extremists who want to re-write the rule book in such a way that encourages less mercy, less grace and less peace. Is that the sort of so-called Christian country we want to build? In the words of the hymn writer Sidney Carter, words sang on Christian Aid Sunday:

When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there?

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
were you there?*

Sing these words as you cast your vote.