

Suffering, the cross and the ballot box.

This has got to be one of the most open-ended General Elections for a generation or two. There is a paradox: the X scrawled in the polling booth could be one of the most significant of votes you ever cast; yet, many won't bother. Some people feel disenfranchised because they live in a 'safe seat' where the sitting MP has a 10,000 majority. Others feel left out because none of the parties really speaks for them or identifies with them.

Last June, in the wake of the parliamentary expenses scandal I wrote about the danger of stay-at-home voters letting in extremists. I surprised no-one, probably. Vicar condemns BNP - shock! might have been the headline.

And I said: "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."

This May, the situation is the same. The parish of Warley Woods lies in the Warley constituency. The three main parties are fielding candidates and that's it. So if you have green persuasions, are Euro-sceptic or your head is turned by what the BNP offer, then you are disenfranchised.

There will be some in our parish who would feel attracted by the message of the BNP. What is fuelling their boldness to field candidates in 300 constituencies this time (including West Bromwich East, West Bromwich West and Edgbaston - all neighbours of ours)?

One answer, I believe, is suffering. Christians and more mainstream political parties need to wake up to this.

When people suffer - through illness or bereavement, broken relationships or bullying - they often become quite isolated. In their isolation they feel aggrieved. Grievance turns to a blame game. And the biggest blame game in our country is to blame those who are different to us. The easy answer is to listen to the little-Englander message of the BNP - white people should have priority.

An real example: a widower in the parish is grieving the loss of a wife he has cared for at home through the last painful years of Alzheimer's. He feels terribly isolated. No-one knew how to handle her deterioration. Her friends stop calling. Even her brothers and sisters stop visiting. Everything became a struggle. Yes, there was a care service for people coping with Alzheimer's sufferers at home. But that was so bureaucratic. Different aspects of social and health care did not speak to each other. It took weeks to get the right aids and adaptations. It took weeks to get the nutritionist in. Meanwhile, she is admitted to hospital where she dies. Even there, the care was unsophisticated, the staff on the ward were stretched and the understanding of what was needed to nurse someone with Alzheimer's was not nuanced enough. Result: bitterness, anger and a need to blame. She'd suffered and he'd suffered. They'd become isolated. He decided most of the problems he'd faced were due to others less deserving (in his opinion) than his wife receiving priority. No-one was listening to him. Solution: vote BNP.

I wonder how many stories of grievance there are which the BNP will use to energise their campaign.

To some degree, the rise of the BNP is linked to the rise of isolation within our communities. People run away from those who suffer (Isaiah 53.3: He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief). Those who suffer become unattractive: principally because human beings find it hard to face up to the eternal questions that suffering throws up.

Christians are taught not to run from those who suffer. Christians are taught that it was through Christ's suffering - his identification with humanity on the cross - that our own infirmities are carried and that we, indeed, find healing. I am not saying that every person who suffers is going to vote for the BNP. But it seems that when we identify with another's suffering, we are entering into Christ's healing. And thus, through that small step, of bearing a cross we are possibly preventing a different kind of cross against the BNP in the polling booth.

This General Election Day, St Hilda's is going to be open for prayer. It is going to be open for prayer from 9am to 10pm. Cast your vote. And then come and pray for our suffering nation and our suffering world.

Paul