

## **POLITICS, OUTRAGE & PROGRESS**

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### *Ecclesiastes 1 & 1 Timothy 2*

I think us Australians have a weird relationship with our politicians. On the one hand, we show them little respect. The leaders of the major parties in the last election were *ScoMo* and *Albo*. Without even taking into consideration the more derogatory alternatives, we don't exactly hold our leaders in high esteem. We do, however, hold them to a high standard. We want them to be honest not corrupt, proactive not passive, to fix problems not cause them. And when they fail we hold them to account. Surely that's part of the reason why we have now had 8 prime ministers in the last 15 years! When they let us down we let them go.

But our relationship with politics is further complicated by our exposure to events that take place all over the world. We see fools and tyrants in power. We see authoritative regimes and all manner of cruelty. We see oppression and aggression and we see it *all the time*.

And so, for many, our engagement with politics is overwhelming. It leads some to tap out altogether. And for others it tends to ramp up in increasing levels of anger, outrage and frustration. And Christians are not exempt from this. We live our lives in this political world and are exposed to all the same pressures and problems as our neighbours. Even today, the chances are there are some in this room today who are thinking we shouldn't be talking about politics at church at all. And others who think we don't talk about political issues enough. And then we will all slot in at different points along the political spectrum. The whole issue can be very fraught and this week I've wondered, "Whose idea was it to do these topical sermons anyway?!"

Having said all that, I don't think any of our modern political situation would take the Teacher of Ecclesiastes by surprise. I'm happy to accept the traditional view that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes was indeed David's son, King Solomon.

And though Solomon's kingdom was only small—King Solomon had seen it all. He was married to Pharaoh's daughter; his ships traded across the sea; and kings and queens came from all around the world to hear his wisdom. As we read again from the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes, here was what Solomon had learned all through his life:

*"Meaningless! Meaningless!"*

*says the Teacher.*

*"Utterly meaningless!*

*Everything is meaningless."*

And again in verse 14:

*I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

The Hebrew word translated meaningless is hebel. It means "vapour" or "mist". It captures the fleeting nature of all human wisdom and wealth and work. Solomon learned that he couldn't really get a hold of anything, and what he did grasp quickly slipped through his fingers. And if all is vapour – if all is mist – then of course this will seep into every area of life, including our politics. As Peter Leithart says,

*Modern political life, Solomon would recognise, is a massive and massively doomed effort to shepherd wind.*

Politics, like all of life, happens *in the mist*. And so today we are going to listen again to the wisdom of Solomon through Ecclesiastes, and hear what he has to teach us about our own approach to politics in the mist.

## **POLITICS IN THE MIST**

### *- The importance of wise government*

At this stage it's probably worth trying to have some sort of definition of what politics actually is. Here's my best effort:

*Politics describes our communal efforts to manage the complexities of life in this world, for the common good of all.*

*[REPEAT]*

If this is what politics is fundamentally about, then we can see why it is important and necessary work. Whether such a task is made the responsibility of some ruling class or democratically shared across all people – politics matters.

The book of Ecclesiastes has reminded us constantly that the world is complex and beyond any of our control. None of us can navigate life all alone in isolation from others. We can't properly educate our children or execute justice apart from doing it together. We can't care for the poor or the sick, we can't combat oppression or corruption apart from doing it together. Politics exists in some form or another in every culture through all of history because God has made us in such a way that we need these sorts of communal efforts to organise our complex lives in this world for the common good of all.

And it makes a huge difference whether it is done well or poorly. The Teacher says in Ecclesiastes 10:16 and 17:

*Woe to the land whose king was a servant  
and whose princes feast in the morning.*

*Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth  
and whose princes eat at a proper time—  
for strength and not for drunkenness.*

Foolish leaders can plunge a whole people into ruin. Wise leaders can forge a path of flourishing for an entire nation. Good government is plainly a good thing. And so pursuing progress in our political life is a very worthy goal.

- *The limits of human progress*

Solomon tells us that politics is important and necessary. But that is hardly his focus. Far more so he wants to teach us that human politics and human progress is *limited*. This is where he begins in Ecclesiastes:

*What do people gain from all all their labours at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and and generations go, but the earth remains forever.*

Solomon describes for us this weariness that comes from a disturbing lack of progress. This heavy burden of everything staying the same despite our best efforts to make substantial change.

Now, this is not to say that real progress can't be made. A simple question will do: would you rather live in the 1st century or the 21st? There is much equality and freedom that we enjoy today that just didn't exist even a hundred years ago; science and technology have improved by leaps and bounds; even just basic health and hygiene are so much better than they would have been in the past.

And yet, you only need to turn on the news, or scroll through your twitter feed to see that inequality and oppression stubbornly persist. That science and technology can be used for great good and great evil. That poverty and injustice and cruelty and oppression remain a reality of the human experience.

The burden that Solomon describes comes about because whatever progress we make is *always* limited. If we could never make any progress at all, we wouldn't be frustrated because we wouldn't expect anything different. If progress was always possible, all the time, then we wouldn't be frustrated, because everything we build would remain. But the prospect of change in an unchanging world—that is weariness. Again, Peter Leithart says:

*We strive to shepherd win and control the vapour, but the world goes indifferently on its way as it has always done. Our frantic efforts count for nothing as the sun still rises and sets, the rivers still flow into the sea, the wind still goes around and around. We are frustrated because the world is impervious to our efforts to improve it.*

And Solomon knew this to be true of human politics as much as anything else. He knew that "in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness." (3:16). Power often belongs to ruthless oppressors who leave the oppressed with no comforter:

*I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them.*

This reality of unrelieved oppression remains even to this day. Solomon knew too that people in power often used their position to fill their own pockets (5:9), or to pursue evil purposes (8:3-4). He knew that often the wise and the worthy are ignored or despised (9:14-16), and that unworthy fools can become rulers and kings (4:13). He knew how easily the human heart could be corrupted by the desire for wealth and power (7:7), and that even the best rulers and most popular leaders rise and fall and are quickly forgotten (4:14-16).

And even good governments constantly come up against their limits. What government can control infectious viruses, or the forces of nature? What politicians can reach into the human heart and curb our selfishness and greed, or quiet our violence and anger? What leader can fight off their own inevitable death and decline?

Political failure and frustration is so common, Solomon tells us that we should "not be shocked at the sight." (5:8)

- *The source of much frustration*

And yet we *are*! All the time! We are constantly shocked at the inability of politics to secure the progress we desire. We say things like, "I can't believe this is happening. It's the year 2022!" To which Solomon would say to us: "You fools!" Solomon unmasks the impossible pretensions of modern politics. He shows us that it doesn't matter what year we live in. What matters is the *world* we live in. We live in a world of mist and vapour, and it is the height of folly to believe that we can bring it under our control.

He shows us a surefire equation for political frustration:

*A high view of politics*

+ *a high expectation of progress*

= *high levels of outrage*

And so if we learn nothing else today, let it be this: embracing Solomon's wisdom that politics is good but that human progress is always limited, will liberate us from much weariness and anger.

For Solomon's wisdom, and the wisdom of the whole Bible doesn't press us into any particular political position. It does however propose a particular political *posture*. It doesn't tell us exactly where we have to stand on any political spectrum, but it does allow us to engage in politics with a counter-cultural *stance* of joy and hope in the midst of the mist.

## 5 POLITICAL POSTURES

So here are *five political postures* that arise from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

### - Prayer

Firstly, **Prayer**. This, I think, is *the* expression of wisdom when it comes to politics. If we understand the vaporous and fleeting nature of our politics, if we recognise the weakness of our politicians and the limitations of our political systems, then we will pray. Praying for our rulers is simply putting into practice the conclusion of Ecclesiastes: *to fear God and keep his commandments*. For as we pray, we are recognising that true power lies with God and not our human governments. And as we heard in 1 Timothy 2, God commands us to pray for those in authority:

*I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all goodness and holiness.*

It is striking as we work through the prayer book at 8am that we pray *every single week*, for “Elizabeth our Queen and all who hold authority in this land”. And it is a great shame that in our modern neglect of such liturgies that our prayers for our rulers are so much rarer in comparison. I do wonder if so much of the outrage in our political discourse is simply an outlet for our collective feeling of the world being beyond our control. Prayer is simply channeling that feeling into our conversation with the Lord, accepting that we *are not* in control, but also resting in the fact that God *is* in control.

And that will transform all our political interactions. For why would we need to write a frustrated facebook post when we can bring our petitions to the King of the universe? How could we persist in outrage at our politicians if we persist in praying for them? It will shape our public criticism of them, if we make regular private intercession for them. It will be harder to join in with disrespectful mockery of our political opponents when we obey God’s command to give thanks for them.

The words of John Bunyan are very appropriate:

*You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.*

"I urge you then, first of all, to pray."

- *Solidarity*

Which leads to a second posture of **solidarity**. When our politics is characterised so much by a taking of sides, we must remember that in a very real sense we are all standing in the same place. Ecclesiastes reminds us that we all stand "under the Sun". We are all creatures; we all exist in the same world of mist and vapour; and we all share the same destiny of death.

Of course, in our communal efforts to manage the complexities of life in the world for the common good of all, we will have very different ideas of what and how we need to do. We will have different conceptions of what the common good actually is. And different ideas of the way that common good can be achieved. But even our biggest political differences do not change the fact that we share a common humanity.

And when we recognise our shared humanity, we can reject seeing politics only in terms of a battle. It's not ultimately about us vs. them. There is only us: one humanity, *all* made in the image of God, *all* fallen into sin, *all* living in a good but fallen world. Contrary to what we often see and hear in the media coverage of politics, we are not, first and foremost, detached individuals trying to secure our own rights and freedoms; we are, rather, members of the human family, existing in an interlocking web of life, meant to promote the health and happiness of our whole community, and indeed the entire creation.

### - *Understanding*

Now this does not mean we abandon all conviction for some vague and bland centrism that wonders why we all can't just get along. But it does mean that we won't abandon all civility, as if politics requires us to go in all guns blazing into every political conversation. Rather, we will adopt a third posture of genuine listening, in order to grow in **understanding**. In our time of social media echo chambers, this desire to actually comprehend what other people think, is absolutely necessary to a Christian political witness.

Here is my pet political peeve. It's the phrase: "I don't understand how anyone can think...". You hear it from Christians too. "I don't understand how a Christian could vote for the liberal party." "I just don't get how a Christian can vote for labour or the greens." *Really*. You *can't* understand? Have you thought of asking someone?!

Solomon's wisdom reminds us that politics is unavoidably complex. Christian history shows that faithful believers have held vastly different political philosophies. And so we must reject suggestions that the answers to political questions are obvious or that solutions to societies problems are simple. We must instead assume the humble posture of understanding, that recognises our own limitations, and refuses to demonise those who think differently to us. The posture of solidarity leads to a posture of understanding.

### - *Community*

A fourth posture, then, is community. For the wisdom of Ecclesiastes does present us with a vision of the good life that shapes our understanding of what the common good actually is. Having just spoken about unrighteous rulers, Solomon says in chapter 8:

*So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of life God has given them under the Sun.*

Five times he repeats this exhortation to enjoy feasting and fellowship with family and friends. It's echoed in 1 Timothy 2. We pray for our leaders so *that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all goodness and holiness.*

Politics at its best is about about establishing and extending the possibility of peace. Creating the conditions where this sort of community can be enjoyed. In one essay, C.S. Lewis puts it like this:

*As long as we are thinking only of natural values we must say that the sun looks down on nothing half so good as a household laughing together over a meal, or two friends talking over a pint of beer, or a man alone reading a book that interests him; and that all economics, politics, laws, armies, and institutions, save in so far as they prolong and multiply such scenes, are a mere ploughing the sand and sowing the ocean, a meaningless vanity and vexation of spirit.*

In other words, when we engage in politics but lose sight of this very practical and tangible aim, we set ourselves to be shepherds of wind.

But the good news is, we can pursue this goal all the time. For if politics is our common effort to manage the complexities of life in the world for the common good of all, then there is a vast sphere of politics that extends beyond the workings of the government to the lives of every day normal people. It's what happens any time we come together in communities of love and care, extending generosity and hospitality, sharing food and drink, and inviting others in to share our joy and gladness.

I think it should give us pause for thought that often we know more about the politics of far flung places than we do about the needs of our neighbours. It's so easy to be consumed by news from around the world where we can literally do nothing practical in response, than to be aware of the needs of people who live in our street. Gandalf, that wise wizard from *The Lord of the Rings*, is a good guide here. At one point he says,

*It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the [comfort and help] of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.*

God has set us in *this* particular place, at *this* particular time. And he commands us not to to save the world but to *love our neighbour*. He calls us not just to a general love of humanity but to the much harder task of loving the *actual human beings* who cross our path every day. And so let us adopt a posture of community.

- *Patience*

One final posture. And with a few more days of reflection, I think I would say this is not so much a posture of patience, as a posture of *hope*. As one writer says, having hope could just about be the most revolutionary political act in our time. For plenty of other wise philosophers have pointed out the futility of the modern political project. Many around us today have noticed the lack of progress and have been engulfed by a kind of despair and pessimism about all forms of authority.

But Solomon avoids this downward spiral into outrage and frustration. For even his unblinking examination examination of power and oppression is pervaded by the faith that God rules over it all. He knows that oppression and injustice often flourish in this world, but he is confident that they will not flourish forever. Like Martin Luther King Jr, he understood that the arc of history is long, but it does bend towards justice. He knows that under the sun there is no perfect justice or final judgement, but he also looks to the time when "God will bring into judgement both the righteous and the wicked." (Eccl 3:17), when "God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

That's the final verse of the book, and it is fitting that this where the book ends: in the assurance that true power lies with the Lord; that there is a King above every king; a God who governs the course of every government. And so Solomon, the son of David, and King in Jerusalem, maintains a posture of hope in the midst of the mist. And so can we. We can dare to hope because we know the greater Son of David, Jesus Christ, the King of the New Jerusalem. We know that he rules a kingdom that is not of this world. We know that he doesn't take for himself, or oppress the weak. Rather he gives generously to the poor and gives healing to the sick. He is a king who stoops to serve the least and the last and the lost, who lays down his own life so that even his enemies might live. He is a king who invites the unworthy to sit around his table, that we might eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of *his* labour. He is a King who *can* reach into our hearts and transform us to be people of faith and love. And he is a King who lives and reigns now, a King who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and king whose gracious rule will never come to an end. Politics in the mist may often feel like a long defeat, but with Christ we can be confident of a final victory and and even longer joy.

And so brothers and sisters, we don't ever need to fear our governments, instead we must "fear God". We don't need to be sucked into a culture of outrage, instead we must obey God's commandments to love him, and love our neighbour. And we don't have to place our faith in the shifting sands of human politics, instead we can place our faith in the One Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.