

## **POWYS COUNTY CIVIC SERVICE**

**JULY 4<sup>TH</sup> 2010.**

**ST ANDREW'S, PRESTIGNE**

---

**Readings: Isaiah 61: 1-4.**

**John 10: 1-11**

What's the point of such occasions as today – apart, that is, from the obvious social enjoyment of meeting with friends and colleagues? More particularly, what's the point of this bit, a religious service? Let's explore this question and find some relevant answers.

Some people say this has no point, avoiding religion like the plague, partly, I'm sure, because the church has done such a poor job of teaching what the faith really means and where its living roots lie.

Some deplore religion on grounds of what they define as 'principle', provocatively but incorrectly

alleging that, over the years, religion has been the cause more conflicts than anything else, which it hasn't actually.

And others would say that this service represents, a coming together of politics with religion, something to be avoided at all costs. (Some of our objectors may still turn up for the tea however, and if there are some such here, no hard feelings! I hope that you will feel less disaffected by the time I finish.)

It's this third objection with which I want to deal in detail – politics and religion not mixing, because I firmly believe that such a reaction misses the point of both:

Politics at any level is not about the relentless pursuit of ideological party-political dogma, come what may. Call me naïve, but I've always been convinced or at least hoped that the vast majority of those who enter the political sphere at any level do

so because they want to make a positive difference to the lives of others, rather than to coin a fast buck at the expense of others.

And we must never forget that entering public life at any level takes courage and brings with it a risk of being misunderstood and targeted.

Thus, political life at any level will mean, from time to time, considering, reaching and implementing difficult and unpopular decisions which impact sometimes adversely on people's lives; however I would be scandalised if such an outcome, inevitable though it might be, were to bring satisfaction to anyone making such decisions. Necessity is a hard taskmaster, and sometimes means following a challenging path, but followed it must be with integrity and courage, regardless of what the verdict of uninformed public opinion might subsequently be. No, I prefer to believe that, even if we can't always agree about actual decisions taken, the vast

majority of those who are in the position to take them are in that position to try and do their best for others.

And may I add to this. We all know, in both our nation and this county, hard economic decisions have had to be made and more undoubtedly remain to be made. You, Mr Chairman, and others will continue to need both vision to discover the best and fairest options and the courage to pursue those options. It goes without saying, but I will say it that, in the process, the painful process as we are told it must be, it will not be the vulnerable, the isolated and the less fortunate who will bear the greatest burden or worse be overlooked or cast aside. The best must be done and done fairly.

To turn then to religion, I'm fairly certain that if you have not already started to think about the forthcoming refreshments at the Judge's Lodgings, you will have picked up in what I've just said, what

your computer will identify as a link. Despite what some would have you believe, the three great faiths which trace their roots back to the patriarch Abraham - Judaism, Islam and, of course, Christianity - have as their fundamental underlying purpose, bringing blessings to the lives of the world's people and enabling everyone to have aspirations which can be nurtured and fulfilled for the common good.

I won't presume to speak for the first two faiths, but, as far as Christianity is concerned, if anyone should think that it's simply about providing eccentric people who need to 'get a life' with something to do, often on a Sunday, and which involves candles and the accompaniment of organ music, they should think again.

This is because the aims of both politics and religion, properly understood, are incredibly similar: human flourishing and caring communities. Worship of God,

listening for the call of God and reflection on the word of God, is about engaging mind, heart and being in living life lovingly and carefully and, again, for the common good.

Religion and politics are entwined when viewed properly. There could be no more concise manifesto for any politician than the one-liner from today's second reading: ***"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."***

And, if you wanted to put more flesh on that particular bone, words from our first reading do it perfectly. The call to the prophet was and remains ***"to bring good tidings to the afflicted; to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise***

***instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness.”***

At the outset of this service, Mr Chairman, you were asked, *“County Councillor Garry Banks, in the Name of Christ I welcome you and your colleagues to St Andrew’s Church, and ask in what way we may assist you?”*

You were not required to compose a reply, it was there for you to read. You said, *“I come to ask for the help and guidance of Almighty God in the discharge of my duties as Chairman of Powys County Council, and ask prayers for my fellow Councillors, that we may together serve our fellow citizens faithfully and diligently in the Offices we hold.”*

Serving others was at the heart of your reply as was an acknowledgement that the guidance of God could help you do it better. Those words from our readings

provide much inspiration which helps define what serving others might mean, but I want to reflect for just a little while on the word ‘guidance’.

The first reading began with the words: ***“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.”*** It was because of this that the prophet knew what he was called to do. In other words, the guidance came to him as a consequence of his being open to the Spirit.

The second reading contained words to which I’ve already referred ***“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”*** As we know, they come from the Gospel according to St John, and they are words which I invariably turn to when I’m asked, as I sometimes am on a visit to a hospital or police station or other public place (usually over a nice buffet!), *“It’s nice to see you, but why are you here?”*.

My response is to say that we (I and my questioner) are actually about the same thing – abundant life –

healing, wholeness, order, purpose, justice and so on. These are the things which prophets demanded and which Jesus brought. He told those who would listen that, if they understood him, they would know God. So, whether you are aware of it or not, then if you seek these things for others you are about God's business in a world he loves and for the people he loves.

A little further on in the John Gospel, we find Jesus promising his disciples that, despite the fact that as a physical presence he would soon be gone from them, the Spirit would bring to their minds all that he had said to them. This, he promised, would bring to their minds just what you, Mr Chairman asked for: guidance. One of the titles given to the Holy Spirit is that of being a guide.

If his guidance is followed, if we are prepared to pay attention to the truth of the Gospel and not simply give it a passing nod when it suits our particular purpose, we will bear the fruit of the Spirit, which in

his letter to the Galatians St Paul conveniently listed for us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. *(Sounds just like a County Council meeting, I daresay!)*

So, there we have it. Our gathering today in this act of worship and commitment is not some meaningless bit of public ceremonial nor is it a dangerous mixture of two elements of life that should not and dare not mix, politics and religion. Neither is it about affording a sense of respectability to the political life of our County. It is an acknowledgement that both politics and religion, properly understood and properly engaged with are about achieving very similar results which uphold human dignity, nourish human aspiration and have as their aim enabling others to live out their lives as abundantly and as fully as possible.

The New Testament commends good government as being for the good ordering of our civic life. And whether local or national. And whether it's healthcare, schools, social services, policing, leisure, highways or any other aspect of that civic life that you debate, manage or deliver, each and every one of them is an element in sustaining and promoting the abundant life which lies at the heart of our faith and is the will of our Heavenly Father for all his children.

So Mr Chairman, brothers and sisters, the guidance is there, the opportunity to tap into it is always available. Be open to the Spirit, seek to bear his fruit, know in your heart and mind what God's call is.

Let me end by saying something to you which some of you might not hear with great frequency: "Thank you." Thank you for offering to serve. Thank you for serving. Thank you for doing your best.

In all your deliberations, in the leadership which you give in our various communities, find and follow the guidance about which I've spoken. Know what is right and be courageous enough to do it.