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A Theological Reflection on Politics

Theology may seem to offer only ideal solutions to the practical difficulties we face in our social and political life. David Atkinson reminds us of how theological verities can profoundly affect our approach to the practical political process. In particular Christian theology can offer politics and politicians a realistic view of what it means to be human, and of the value of human beings; a reaffirmation of the intrinsic importance of communal life, structured by 'covenants'; and the importance of justice as essential in creating a healthy *polis*.

THERE IS A REFRAIN that we in the church still hear, sometimes from politicians whose views are under scrutiny, that 'the Church must keep out of politics and concern itself with morality'. I want to suggest that this is as unacceptable as is Queen Victoria's Minister, Lord Melbourne's comment who, after hearing a fervent preacher, is alleged to have said that if religion were now going to start interfering into matters of a person's private life, things had come to a pretty pass!

For if religion means anything in practice, it offers a vision of the world as the sphere of God's purposes which includes building a community of people into his family, whose personal and corporate life together finds its fulfilment and joy in reflecting something of God's life, God's love, God's goodness and God's justice. It also offers resources of grace through which to work at bringing that vision into being.

Theology is a way of thinking about God and God's relation to the world. And more than that: because theology exists to correct and improve the Church's confession of its faith, theology itself has a moral impetus – to promote the life and love and goodness and justice of God in the world which he loves.

So at its broadest, a Christian theology of politics is an exercise in trying to think through the implications of Christian faith for corporate life together in this world, and therefore for the role of communities, governments and other institutions through which that life is maintained.

We are, of course, going through a period of rapid social and political change. In the past twenty years in this country, one of the most significant shifts in political thinking has been the diminishment in the State's claim to competence (and therefore responsibility), for ensuring social and economic welfare, and the growth instead of what is called 'the Civil Society', in which autonomy is granted on the one hand to 'the market' (with minimum regulation), and on the other to

'communitarian institutions' such as the family, the church, and voluntary associations (with minimum support).

Another major change of recent decades has been in undermining of the 'nation-state' through the forces of the global economy. The power of global capital and transnational corporations seems to render national politics increasingly helpless on certain major issues, and perhaps contributes to the growing disillusionment with party politics. The obverse of this is the emergence of a new local politics with a greater stress on partnership in business and local government, and a welcome revival of concern about the local as well as global environment.[1]

It is in this changing context that this lecture seeks to ask what Christian theology has to say about government, national and local, and about the practice of politics. But this must inevitably raise prior questions about the nature of humanity and the values on which human community depends: love and justice, liberty and equality.

Christian community and politics today

In today's world we find a wide range of Christian responses to the political world. Nicholas Wolterstorff[2] places them broadly on a scale between the 'avertive' and the 'transformative' approaches to living in God's world. There are those, like Lord Melbourne, who say that the Church should keep out of politics. Many of those see the world as an evil place from which Christians are called on to withdraw: Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.[3] On the other hand there are those who are nearer to the more transformative view of Calvin, who see the world as the object of God's love, who grieve over its evil, but who believe that the State has proper role in the purposes of God, and believe in engagement with and transformation of the world towards the kingdom of Christ. I find myself committed to a transformative view, and draw some support from that tantalising paragraph in which the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, and Jesus asks them to show him a tax coin. 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then Jesus said to them 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'.

At first sight this seems to support an 'avertive' view: the separation of faith from life in the political world. But I think there is a great deal to be said for another interpretation which goes back to Tertullian at the end of the second century.[4] It seems to me overwhelmingly to support a transformative approach: Give to Caesar what bears his image – and so give to God what bears his image. And what does bear God's image? All human beings do. Tertullian says: 'While you give your money to Caesar, you give yourself' – including your money – 'to God'. Or, as we might elaborate, there is nothing which belongs to John Major or the Inland Revenue, which does not first and foremost belong to God.

Let us take the view, then, that the whole of life in this world, including politics, is a proper concern of Christian theology. We will first explore theological

1 I am very grateful to Dr Pat Logan for his comments on these matters, and for drawing my attention to R. M. Kanter, *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1995.

2 N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1983.

3 2 Cor. 6:17.

perspectives on three of the basic values of the political task: humanity, community and justice. In the second part, we will explore politics in practice, and the role of the State in the purposes of God.

A. Political values

1. Humanity

What I really want to talk about here is human ambiguity. Stanley Jaki wrote a book called *Angels, Apes and Men,*[5] in which he argued that to do justice to the full meaning of what it is to be human we need to avoid the idealism that suggests we are really embodied angels, and the reductionism that suggests we are only self-conscious apes. Neither reductionism nor self-deification are consistent with a Christian theology, but nor, I think, are they consistent with our experience of what it is to be human. Our experience is one of ambiguity. We know that there is that in our make-up which is 'of the dust'. We are clearly physical, embodied beings who get ill, become frail, will die. To borrow Shylock's words (about his Jewishness), 'If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?' And yet there is that in our experience which Peter Berger calls 'signals of transcendence', by which he means that in our experience which points beyond itself. This is another way of saying what theology means when it describes human beings as made to be in the image of God.

Peter Berger[6] refers to our sense of moral obligation which confronts us from beyond ourselves, requiring us to do our duty, leading to a sense of guilt when we are in the wrong. We believe that falling in love, or experiencing deep grief, are more than physiological processes. There is also, as Becker reminds us in *The Denial of Death,*[7] a defiant refusal to accept death, even for many of us a death-defying hope that death is not the end. We are able look at ourselves, analyse and discuss ourselves in all our physical make up; and we are also able to come round the other side of the camera and recognise ways in which we our spiritual nature transcends our physical make up in all sorts of ways.

Human ambiguity extends to the moral area of life also. We aim so high, but often fall so low. 'I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do'. (Rom. 7:19). There is, in other words, the need for an understanding not only of the wonder of the fact that human beings are created to bear the image of God, but also of the fact of sin.

Here is Pascal:

> 'What kind of freak, then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious. Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe.'[8]

This ambiguity surely means that in our human inter-relationships, we need a political realism. We may not treat ourselves only in terms of the thoroughgoing optimistic idealism of human nature which we find, for example, at times in that

4 I learned this from Peter Hinchliff, *Holiness and Politics*, DLT, London 1982.

5 Sherwood Sugden and Co., La Salle, Illinois 1983.

6 Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, Heinemann, London 1969.

7 Macmillan, London 1973.

theorist of democracy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Man is naturally good, and only by institutions is he made bad.'[9] Nor may we operate only in terms of the thoroughgoing empiricist pessimism of human nature which we seem to find in Thomas Hobbes' insistence on the absolute need of government as an essential protection against the selfishness of nature.

A theological realism wants to come to terms with the paradox and the ambiguity, with our earthiness and our spirituality, our creativity in God's image, and our sin, and we need to structure our relationships in the light of it. Our politics needs to take this ambiguity seriously without over optimism about our autonomous capacity to be good outside the help of God's grace, and without over pessimism about human shortcomings. I think Reinhold Niebuhr's defence of democracy got it exactly right: 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'.[10]

To summarise: one crucial theological contribution to politics is a perspective on what it is to be human – to affirm our preciousness as people made in the image of God, and the marring of that image through sin. To say (using the title of Shirley Williams 1981 book, though perhaps with a stronger sense of human frailty than that book indicates): Politics is for People.[11]

2. Human community

The reference to Shirley Williams leads naturally into a discussion of the social dimensions of human being. Williams comments on the way Robert Owen and R. H. Tawney saw that 'the industrial revolution had torn apart organic feudal society and replaced the Christian concept of the whole man with the abstraction of economic man'.[12] She argues that the socialist politics she stands for 'is not primarily about public ownership or state control of the economy, it is about fellowship, community and participation'.

One of the legacies of the Enlightenment in Western Europe in the last two hundred years has been the emergence of 'the individual' – a word which Professor Ronald Preston says he tries never to use.[13] Why?

Let us comment on some aspects of the culture we have inherited from that movement of thought in eighteenth century Europe of which we are all heirs. Although there is much to be thankful for in the light that was shed on many aspects of life and truth, the Enlightenment was also the doorway into the loss of the 'person' as 'person-in-relation-to-other person'. A focus on individual rationality and autonomous individual human will, led us to believe that the world of 'facts' is public, observable, objective, and can be separated from the world of 'values', thought to be matters of private preference and individual choice.

This view of ourselves necessarily affects the way we think of ourselves and our relationships. Combining this Enlightenment heritage with sophisticated technology, we tend now to see ourselves mostly as constructionists, interveners

8 B. Pascal, *Pensées*, 1654.
9 J-J. Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 1754.
10 R. Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, Nisbet, London 1945.
11 Shirley Williams, *Politics is for People*, Allen Lane, London 1981.
12 Williams, *Politics*, p 24.
13 In his introduction to the SPCK, London 1976 edition of William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, first published in 1942.

in the system, manipulators. What matters is technique, problem-solving. The ideal is of detachment, not engagement, autonomy rather than mutual interdependence. We see the world mostly in terms of what Martin Buber called I-It, and this crowds out more personal ways of living: I-Thou.[14]

The results are well described by Colin Gunton by the word 'alienation'.[15] People are alienated from each other. We become alienated from our environments. Facts are separated from values. We become divided up within ourselves. Down the deep fissures which open up in our culture go words like 'purpose', 'meaning', 'community', 'fellowship'. The grand conclusion to that trend was the statement, 'there is no such thing as "society"'.

Important as 'the individual' is, the 'individualism' of this part of the Enlightenment heritage is not true to the world as it really is. We are coming to see all too clearly that there are 'problems' in human life and society for which there are no techniques, no solutions. We are being forced on all sides to re-examine our Enlightenment framework of understanding. We are being forced back to the point Buber made:

> Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines – one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity – so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the colour of his hair or the colour of his speech or the colour of his graciousness; I have to do these things again and again; but immediately he is no longer You.[16]

Philosopher John Macmurray made a similar point:

> The Self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other... the self is constituted by its relation to the Other... it has its being in its relationship;.. this relationship is necessarily personal.[17]

By contrast to the individualism of much of our culture, other parts of the world know better than the West does that there are no individual persons, there are only persons in relationship. I am who I am only in relation to you. You are who you are only in relation to me, to your parents, to your colleagues to your friends, to your society, to your God. We are all set in a network of relationships.

As Colin Gunton (and others) demonstrate clearly, this insight is rooted in the mystery of God the Holy Trinity, who is in God's own self a communion of persons in relationships of love in which the Creator Father, Redeemer Son and Sanctifying Spirit give themselves to each other in love and from whose creative love all things come.[18]

If we human beings are to be the image of God, then for us to be truly human means that we are essentially persons in relation to other persons. We are, to use the OT word, in covenants.

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14 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1937.

15 Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, Marshall Morgan & Scott, London 1985

16 Buber, *I and Thou*, p 59.

17 John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, London, Faber & Faber, 1961, p 17.

18 Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1991; *The One, the Three and the Many*, CUP, Cambridge 1993.

The Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks draws on the OT concept of 'covenant' in his discussion of democracy.[19] I find that very satisfying, for 'covenant' holds together the sense of corporate solidarity of a people bound together with ties of mutual promise and obligation, while not losing the importance of individual freedom, choice and responsibility.

In the OT, the divine covenant is used again and again as a paradigm for our human covenants which we make with one another: wife/husband, parent/child, teacher/pupil, political leader/constituent; neighbour/neighbour. When our human covenants are shaped by the divine covenant, they make for the best for human flourishing.

Covenant is more than contract. Covenant is a dynamic relationship between parties based on commitment and consent. It is about mutuality not coercion. It is about the priority of human values over material values. At its heart are words like communion; service; stewardship; forgiveness; and a priority towards those who are disadvantaged.

3. Human justice

There are many different ways of understanding the word 'justice'. For some people, justice means 'fairness', everybody getting a fair deal. For other people, justice includes the idea of human rights. But what are human rights?

(i) Rights, responsibilities and torah

At the heart of the covenant faith of the Jews which was taken up into Christianity, is the giving of God's law, torah, – God's loving instructions. But torah does not stand alone as a detached legal code. It is given within the wider framework of a covenant of grace. Its purpose, then, is relational. We are most familiar with the Ten Commandments, which may well have functioned as part of ancient Israel's criminal law but which also served as a reminder of the basic moral values which undergird a covenantal society, because they reflect something of the moral character of God. They are picked up as a framework for the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel, and for some of the writings of St Paul.

I believe that if we are going to use the language of human rights, we need to relate this to God's torah, because if we are going to talk about human rights, the covenant model requires us also to talk about human responsibilities. If our rights as human beings are related to the fact that we are made in the divine image, and our relationships are most fulfilling if they reflect the divine covenant, then there is an essential mutuality of rights and responsibilities. On the one hand, this means that if you have certain rights, then I have a responsibility to make sure that as far as possible your rights are respected. On the other hand, it means that if you claim certain rights in relation to society, then you yourself also have certain responsibilities towards that society.

At the risk of oversimplification, we can use the Decalogue summary of God's law as a summary of God's 'loving instructions' for covenanted human responsibilities; – that is, for how people are to live responsibly if their lives are to

19 Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future*, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1995, p 109.

be fulfilled and their society is to function healthily. From the teaching of Jesus Christ, we learn that God's law can be summarised in two brief statements: love towards God, and love towards other human beings. Its purpose is human well-being: human flourishing.

Subsumed in both the Decalogue and Jesus' summary of the Law are basic sustenance rights, for example rights to sufficient food and shelter. Yet we all know that in the modern world, our share in the resources which are available to sustain life are in large measure related to the social and economic structures which our nation states adopt, and which the world economic structures dictate. They are also increasingly related to the global questions about the sustainability of any life at all on this planet, and to our stewardship of the environment in which we live. There are pressing Christian concerns here, in the context of world hunger and world energy needs, and the world's future, which bring God's justice onto an international agenda. For justice is the political and social and environmental expression of neighbour love.

(ii) Freedoms and benefits

Clearly some of these rights and responsibilities are to do with freedoms – people should be free to take responsibility for their own lives and families, and live without fear of coercion.

Some of these rights and responsibilities are to do with benefits. If everyone is to be able to exercise their freedoms to some extent, there must be sufficient fair distribution of resources and opportunities for that to happen. Some people have to limit the exercise of their freedoms so that others can enjoy theirs. The covenant model once again gives us a pattern of the mutuality of shared commitments for the common good. Of course the task of economics is to balance the use of scarce resources ('efficiency') with an equitable distribution of income. Both these emphases are to do with persons in relation to each other. Idealised capitalism tends to emphasise competitive self-interest over social well being; idealised socialism emphasises co-operation instead of competition as a device for social organisation, but at some cost to personal liberties.

Clearly concepts such as equality, freedom and justice cannot be discussed in isolation from each other.[20] A Christian understanding of justice tries to balance freedoms and benefits, so that everyone has as far as possible an equitable share of resources and opportunities, everyone has as far as possible the chance to enjoy their rights and to exercise their responsibilities. Once again the central theme is community, participation and fellowship. Politics is for people in God's world.

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20 One major attempt to hold all three together is found in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* OUP, Oxford 1972. He argues that inequalities of wealth are acceptable only under three conditions: i) that each person should have an equal to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with a like liberty for all; ii) that inequalities of wealth, power, income and status must result in the maximisation of benefit to the most disadvantaged; iii) such inequalities must go with positions of appointments open to all under fair conditions of equality of opportunity. Cf. the summary by Francis Bridger, 'Equality' in *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson & D. H. Field, IVP, Leicester 1995. I am grateful to Dr Francis Bridger for his comments on these paragraphs.

(iii) Justice and mercy

Finally we need to say something more about the justice of God. In the Bible, God is described as 'just'. His justice is then used as a standard by which human justice is measured. But God's justice goes beyond what human justice requires – God's justice merges into goodness and into mercy.

God's justice includes provision for the needy, punishment for the wrongdoer, the offer of forgiveness for the penitent, comfort for the suffering, health for the sick, and a bias on behalf of the poor, the disadvantaged and the outcasts – in other words, a concern for human welfare and well being at all levels.

There is a further dimension to justice: the punishment of wrongdoing. Justice is about rights and responsibilities, freedoms and benefits. But a Christian understanding of justice needs to say more than this. We recognise the sinfulness of human beings, that there is a basic ambiguity in human beings. To some extent all of us fall short of God's laws. There are people who do not respect others' rights, there are people who wrongly take away life, who break up relationships, who steal others' property, who damage others' reputation. At that point justice needs to become retributive: society needs a structure of civic law which not only provides for freedoms and shared benefits, but also punishes those who do wrong and do not respect the rights and well-being of others. Is there a covenantal aspect to punishment?

The work from the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge on what they call 'relational justice' seems to me a very creative way forward in the reform of our criminal justice system in this country. They have four goals for public policy: the building of relationships of trust in society which can help prevent some crime; a sentencing policy for offenders which attempt to repair relationships between offenders and society and especially between offenders and their victims; a move towards punishment as far as possible being within the community, and so in the context of the relationships which have been fractured; the use of prison as a last resort for offenders who are a danger to the public or to themselves, but in a way which minimises the relational costs to prisoners and their families.

The biblical word which captures this sense of well-being based on the justice of God is shalom. Often translated 'peace' shalom means much more than the absence of conflict. Shalom based on justice is present when people enjoy good relationships with each other, within their communities, throughout their land, and with their God. There is a personal and a social dimension to shalom.[21]

B. Political practice

We can now begin to open up the question: What are the institutions of the State for in the purposes of God? And then we will offer some comments on political practice today.

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21 David Atkinson, *Peace in our Time*, IVP, Leicester 1985, ch. 10.

1. The State

Jesus' attitude to the Jewish state is instructive. When challenged about the laws concerning sabbath observance, he replied 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'. (Mark 2:27). In other words, he interpreted the laws in the light of his conviction that laws were there to serve people – to help them be the sort of people God intended. Here is our first theme once more: politics is for people.

The second theme is that all authority comes from God. Jesus stands silent before Pontius Pilate. Pilate said to him 'You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above'. (John 19:10f.) The State, which is the organisation developed by a community to protect its members and order its life, holds its power from God, and any allegiance it claims can only ever be part of a greater allegiance to God himself.

This is the point St Paul is making at greater length in Rom. 13:1-7 There are a number of things to comment on here.

(i) St. Paul argues that all authority comes from God

The emphasis here is not that all and every exercise of human authority is blessed by God, but that all human authority is accountable to God and is possible only because of the authority of God. This is a warning to those in authority: you are accountable to God for the authority you have. That is what Paul means. It is a warning to those who would disregard the authorities: whether we like it or not, those exercising a governing authority have a God-given task.

We can see that this teaching does not lead simply to an acquiescence in whatever the State decides to do. If we turn to Revelation chapter 13, there, some years later than St Paul was writing, imperial Rome had become oppressively totalitarian. The emperor demands the worship of his citizens, and the writer then describes the state as a demonic monster. This is an extreme example of a state that has exceeded its God-given authority, and failed to exercise its God-given responsibilities.

(ii) Civil government is instituted for order and justice

What is the State for in the purpose of God? To provide a framework in which human lives can flourish; can be lived in order and in justice. St Paul says that the person in authority is 'God's servant to promote what is good'. The State exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of what is good, for the shalom, welfare, of its people.

We said that Jesus Christ summarised God's law in terms of love to other human beings; love to our neighbours; and that the social and political expression of neighbour-love is justice. Part of the role of the State in the purposes of God is to provide a social context in which people can enjoy their basic human freedoms under the law, in which they can have an equitable share in resources and benefits under the law, and in which goodness can flourish. But just as the State cannot make people free, so the State cannot make people good. Archbishop William Temple was certainly not unaware of the need to take seriously the sinfulness and

self-interest of human beings. The art of government, he famously said, is 'that art of so ordering life that self interest prompts what justice demands'.[22]

(iii) There is a proper use of the sword by the State, but not by the individual

In Romans chapter 13, St Paul refers to the magistrate who 'bears the sword.' In the previous chapter, St Paul has reminded Christians that in personal relationships they must not take revenge. 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him drink.' Vengeance belongs only to God. But here St. Paul indicates that the State may sometimes do what it would be wrong for the private citizen to do. The officers of the state are 'God's servants' to punish wrongdoers. The properly constituted authority of the State, in other words, is the servant of God to establish justice, if necessary by the sort of force that it would be quite wrong for an individual to exercise.

We may summarise this to suggest that the biblical authors understand that the State is given the responsibility for enabling people to live together in covenants of care. Where the State fulfils this responsibility, it is a positive good in God's world. In our current Western culture with a diminishing nation state, a growing global economic power base, a move towards more locally based 'civil society', the relation of Christian faith to the provision of justice, order and shalom needs constantly to be worked through in relation to social structures.

2. The practice of politics today

I want in this final section to offer some reflections on the practice of politics today. I say nothing about the party system; I offer no programmes for detailed political action; I do not comment on economic theory which is way beyond my competence. I want rather to explore the concept of covenant a little further, taking as a model the divine covenant relationship depicted in the Old Testament (though I also think it is fulfilled in some of the language of the kingdom of Christ which we find in the New).

As we said before, covenant is a dynamic relationship between parties based on commitment and consent. It is about mutuality not coercion. It is about the priority of human values over material values. At its heart are words like communion; service; stewardship; forgiveness; and a priority towards those who are disadvantaged.

We will select five issues for comment.

(i) I believe we must take seriously what has been called 'a bias on behalf of the poor.'

In a memorable paragraph Karl Barth writes:

> The human righteousness required by God and established in obedience, the righteousness which according to Amos 5:24 should pour down as a mighty stream – has necessarily the character of vindication of right in favour of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of his people, God always takes

22 Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, p 65.

> his stand on this side, and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it.[23]

Will Hutton's book *The State We're In*[24] describes a loss of vision in the practice of British politics over recent decades, coupled with an analysis of the ways we have become a 'thirty, thirty, forty' society. The first 30% of the working population are disadvantaged, low or no work, low pay, stressed families. The middle 30% are marginalised and insecure. They hold short term or part time jobs with no clarity about future prospects. The last 40% are the privileged whose market power has increased and is increasing. On the global front, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues convincingly, in my view, against the so called 'modernisation' view of the global economy, in which the world is seen as consisting of distinct societies, each at a certain point of economic development, and in favour of a 'world system' view in which the world is one economic society.[25] However, in that world system at present, the core of rich nations are effectively living off the periphery of poor nations, and will continue to do so unless the rich nations take responsibility for the interests of others. We need to put all this in the light of the persistent obligation laid on the covenant people of God to care for the disadvantaged, the alien, the orphan and the widow. In other words, if we are on the side of the poor, God is on our side.

(ii) Therefore we need a recovery of the Soul of Politics, or to put it another way, the importance of the fact that politics is for people.

In a world in which the political agenda has almost completely been hijacked by economists, and economics is being ruled by multi-national global corporations, it is very easy for people to get lost. People become items in a dole queue, statistics on a balance sheet, numbers on a data base. Yet behind every item and statistic and number there is a face like yours and mine, with similar anxieties about the future, similar struggles with the fact that our neighbour has cancer, similar hopes for our children's education. I once heard Bishop David Jenkins say that part of the task of the church – and therefore of a theological reflection on politics – is to help give the statistics faces, and help give the faces voices. We need, in other words, to recognise the Spirit of God in the soul of all humanity, and find in that recognition a profound source of hope.

(iii) Is it possible to move from the politics of coercive power to a politics of service?

It is salutary to place the common concept of political power as coercive – even manipulative – alongside these words of Jesus:

> You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.[26]

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23 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1957, p 386.

24 Jonathan Cape, London 1995.

25 Wolterstorff, *Justice and Peace.*

26 Mark 10:35-45.

This is a very different concept of power – not of lordliness, but of self-giving; not of coercion, but of service.

In earlier days theologians used to speak of work as service. Some understood that as the service of vocation (Luther), or of duty (the Puritans). Karl Barth describes the world of work as human service to sustain the context in which the kingdom of God can grow. Work as service: creatively using the gifts God has given to meet the needs of the common good. Indeed Dr Nigel Biggar suggests that a recovery of a conception of work as service will mean that the powerful are to use their power to build up, to dignify the powerless, to empower the powerless. 'They are to use their power to bring the needy into a state where they are no longer compelled to rely on the beneficence of the powerful. In other words, the powerful are to serve in such a way that their own power decreases as that of those whom they serve increases.' A politics of service thus aims to foster maturity not dependency. This contrasts with the patronising tendency among some politicians (as evidenced in the Scott Report) which leads to excessive secrecy: 'We know best: and we know that it's best that they don't know'.[27]

(iv) Can there be a politics of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a central covenant word; a central Christian word. It speaks of the costliness of death and resurrection. It does not mean forgetting. It does not mean pretending that nothing was wrong. It means facing wrong directly. It means confronting and acknowledging wrong, and the hurt that has been caused. It means taking with utmost seriousness the sin that can be institutionalised in social structures. And then it means a willingness not to give way to a spirit of retaliation and revenge, but a willingness, despite wrong, to seek to confront injustice and to build for the future in the most creative way possible.

This is easier said than done, as we see daily in Northern Ireland. That it can be done, we are beginning to see in the new South Africa. It has wide implications. In our society one politician makes a mistake, reforms, repents and begins a new life of community service. Years later his name comes to the headlines again, but all that is newsworthy is not his sacrificial service in the intervening years, but his mistake of two decades ago. Thank God that He does not allow all our sins to accumulate against us. Why cannot the media walk in the fresh air of forgiveness?

To give an example of another scale: does the posture of nuclear deterrence tell the world that what we care most about in international relationships is justice? Or does it rather say that we are committed to bare retaliation, and that if you provoke us hard enough we will be indiscriminately and devastatingly cruel to you. Can there be an international politics of forgiveness?

(v) Finally, I want to refer to another concept embedded in the covenant law of ancient Israel, and being revived very creatively today: the Jubilee. It holds together much of what I have been saying.

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27 Nigel Biggar, 'Power and Powerlessness' in David Atkinson, *Pastoral Ethics*, Lynx, Oxford 1994, pp 148ff. I am grateful to Dr Biggar for his comments on this section.

Whether or not the Jubilee was ever enacted, we do not know. According to Leviticus 25, the law of the jubilee provided that every fifty years the fields were to lay fallow, property was to be returned to its original owners, and slaves were to be set free.

The theological rationale was that the land was not owned absolutely by the people, it belonged to God, and the people were accountable to God for their use of it. The people – and even the slaves were people – belonged to God. So Jubilee was concerned with the protection of a certain kind of land tenure, and with countering the tendency for land and therefore wealth to accumulate in the hands of only a few. Jubilee was also concerned with support for the family as an economic unit, and in providing a safety valve to release the pressure of economic forces on the poor.

I think the Jubilee underlies the manifesto in which Jesus Christ laid out his mission:

To preach good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (viz. jubilee).[28]

I think Jubilee also underlies St Paul's collection for the poor in Jerusalem, when he writes to the Corinthians 'that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want'.[30]

Pope John Paul II has designated the year 2000 as a Great Jubilee[29], and in what I think would be a wonderful visual aid for the political dimensions of the Christian gospel, has urged the world to mark the Millennium as a time for cancelling, or at least reducing substantially, third world debt. It would be costly to the rich West to do so. But it would give a global illustration of many of the themes I have been trying to outline: politics is for people; the recovery of community; stewardship; service; the equitable distribution of resources; forgiveness; and the justice which is the social expression of neighbour love. The Christian vision of politics is a vision of God who so loved the world, a vision which Christian theology can begin to help us explore.

This article is an edited version of a Lecture given at Winchester Cathedral, Lent 1996.[31]

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28 Luke 4:18-19.

29 2 Cor 8:14.

30 *Tertio Millennio Adveniente: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, Catholic Truth Society, London, para 51.

31 I have been greatly assisted by conversations with Drs Pat Logan, Francis Bridger, Martin Kitchen, Robert Song and Nigel Biggar. They, of course, are not to be held responsible for any of the views expressed in this paper.