

FAITH IN POLITICS

First of all let me say what an honour it is to have been asked to give the Craigmyle Lecture.

People of faith realise that politics has a role to play in the creation of a country run according to Gospel principles, so today I thought I might look at the interaction between faith and politics and at the role of faith in modern public life.

Christianity, especially as interpreted by the Catholic faith, is largely a matter of absolutes. This is right. That is wrong. This is true. That is false. Love the sinner. Hate the sin. There is plenty of room for forgiveness and understanding when standards are breached but none at all when it comes to deciding what the standards ought to be in the first place. As Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* one may not determine good by what is popular or popularly accepted but only by reference to absolute truth. Something may be widely accepted as right but can still be wrong and vice versa. Hence the catholic doctrine on contraception is right despite a widespread view that it is wrong.

Politics, on the contrary, has precious few absolutes. It is the art of compromise, of the possible, of barter and of maintaining the uneasy balance between leading and following popular perceptions. A Christian who insists

on absolutes will never be much of a political practitioner but that is very different from saying that he may not be both a politician and adhere to his principles.

Before I examine that proposition, however, perhaps I should ask the even more fundamental question: why should Christians be engaged in politics at all? Did not Christ himself eschew the political arguments of the day? Did he not refrain from condemning the occupying Romans and from forbidding the payment of Caesar's taxes?

Yes, we need Christians in politics. If you believe that God can work through government – and strange as it seems, He does occasionally – then there have to be Christians in politics. To keep politics as a religion-free zone is undesirable if you want them practised by men of principle and, in any event, it has proved quite impossible even in those countries where there is the most stringent separation of Church and State. I shall look more closely at this later. Meanwhile let us return to compromise and absolutes.

It was an issue that was thrust upon me early in my parliamentary career. Shortly after I became an MP in 1987 David Alton, who was then the Liberal Democrat member for Liverpool, Mossley Hill, came up in the ballot for private members' bills and promptly introduced one to reduce the upper time limits for abortion from the then twenty eight weeks to eighteen.

It does not require a master mind to work out that this bill, which was portrayed as repressive and reactionary,

was in itself a massive compromise. David Alton and the majority of those who signed up to his bill did not believe in allowing abortion up to the eighteenth week. Most of us believed in no abortion at all but if we had proposed that we might as well have stayed at home while Parliament debated it because there would have been no chance whatever that it would pass even the first Parliamentary stage, let alone progress into law. We had to be governed by the art of the possible.

That much was obvious but a more difficult challenge awaited us. At the bill's second reading it became all too obvious that, although we had a pleasing majority at that stage, we would lose at later stages unless we exempted all unborn handicapped children from the limits we were proposing.

It was anathema. The bill's sponsors firmly believed that unborn children with disabilities had as much right to live as their able – bodied counterparts and the proposed exemption was profoundly unacceptable. Some among our number said no but others, among whom I was one, said yes.

An examination of the figures showed that of all abortions after the eighteenth week 8% were performed on grounds of handicap leaving 92% performed for other reasons. I argued that if I were to be confronted with a shipwreck and a hundred drowning people, I would not refuse to save ninety two for the sake of the eight I could not reach. We should, I believed, maximise the saving of unborn life rather than take an absolute position which would guarantee failure.

I still believe that to have been the right decision because I judge a political compromise by whether it takes one forward, backwards or leaves one standing still. If it does either of the last then it should be resisted but if it does the first then it should be considered. The old cliché is true: to reach the North Pole you have to take one step beyond your own front door. Unless you do that you will never reach your goal. Any compromise which takes you nearer to your objective is usually worth having if you can not achieve the whole journey in one giant leap.

Occasionally no journey can be made without a giant leap but very often in such cases the real test then is endurance. Resolution, sustained over years or even decades in the face of resistance and derision can yield results. One only has to think of Wilberforce - and I often do - to understand the challenges a faith driven politician can face.

In such circumstances it will not only be the enemy one with whom one has to battle but friends as well. We can imagine what family, friends and colleagues would have been saying.

“It’s no good, Wilberforce. Give it up.”

“Don’t waste your life on a single issue, Wilberforce.”

Possibly even: “Don’t be such a bore, Wilberforce.”

But Wilberforce bored on and the day came when slavery was abolished and an even later day came when

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nobody could understand why anyone had ever thought it morally acceptable in the first place. That example has comforted many a pro-lifer in the seemingly fruitless quest for recognition for the humanity of the unborn.

The prayer of Sir Francis Drake sums it up and I quote the short version: *O, Lord when thou givest to thy servant to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same until it be thoroughly finished which yieldeth the true glory.*

Many wonder why it is that Christians in Parliament do not always agree on the nature of the great work, why we differ, why we argue from party political standpoints. Some go further and ask why Christians can not form a separate party. To this I always say that it is part of the Divine plan that we should be divided and God forbid that we should ever form our own political party.

I said earlier that if God is to work through government then we need Christians in government but in a democracy government changes hands and therefore we need Christians in all mainstream parties. Of course you can not be a Christian and a communist or a Christian and a fascist but it is not merely right but also desirable that we should have Christian Socialists, Christian Conservatives and Christian Liberals. If Christians are confined to one party then it follows that in a democracy there will be periods of godless government which can hardly be part of His plan.

It is crucial therefore that we disagree – and we do. I have mentioned David Alton, the cross bench peer and former Liberal Democrat MP, as someone with whom I made common cause over the abortion issue and indeed there were other occasions, such as Sunday trading, when we were comrades in arms. I visit him and his family regularly because I am godmother to his fourth child and he was one of my sponsors when I was received into the Catholic faith but we can not talk politics for much more than two minutes without coming to verbal blows.

Some years ago a new organisation was set up called the Movement for Christian Democracy, with the aim not of forming a breakaway Party but rather of drawing together Christians from all Parties to see if we could determine a common agenda. Most of us could not. The Movement is still in existence but it did not become the powerful group originally envisaged.

Yet, persist the bewildered, surely we must agree. Were not Christ's commandments crystal clear?

Yes, they were. Take for instance His exhortation *let ye who have two coats give unto him that hath none.*

Straightforward enough, one might think. Yet a Conservative looking at those words will interpret them as being primarily but not exclusively an injunction towards personal responsibility: that it is our job to relieve need where we find it rather than to assume that because we have paid our taxes the State should do it all. A Socialist will interpret it as meaning we should confiscate the second coat through taxation, cut it up and redistribute it. I exaggerate very slightly in order to make a point, that point being that if one very narrow text can

produce varying views as to how to implement it then it is scarcely surprising that the whole panoply of Christian doctrine should do the same but on an even greater scale.

Two men who mixed faith and politics neatly illustrate this: David Shepherd and Archbishop Worlock agreed on social doctrines but not on religious ones and the reverse is equally possible and much manifest in this country's political institutions. Therefore we must expect Christians to differ politically and rejoice rather than despair when they do.

Yet what right have we, demands an increasingly secular society, to allow our political activity to be driven by our religion? Is not religion a private matter? No, it most certainly can never be just a private matter, reserved for private expression and politely ignored in public.

St. Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthians, says *we believe and therefore speak*. It is the leitmotif of my political work. But Christ's command is even stronger: *hide not thy light under a bushel*. My enemies have accused me of many things but never yet of hiding my light under a bushel.

Yet such is the growth of secularism that people can be very surprised indeed and often somewhat puzzled and embarrassed when confronted with unequivocal statements of faith. This might be a good place to consider a dramatic manifestation of this phenomenon: the reaction of the Muslim community to the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed.

The depth of outrage and distress took by surprise a world conditioned to the wimpish reaction of Christians, who have come to tolerate any blasphemy from the casual invocation of the Second Person of the Trinity to mocking depictions of the cross to tales of sexual engagements between Our Lord and Mary Magdalene.

Yet blasphemy hurts. Deeply. Horribly. I do not endorse riots and violence, but, yes, I understand the emotions of those engaged in them rather better apparently than do some newspaper editors. Why is it that we single out religion for rudeness and insult? Why do we institutionalise such nastiness to the extent of awarding prizes for art to those who mock?

We would not allow such unpleasantness on a racial basis. Ah, say the blasphemers, that is different. You can not help whatever race you belong to but you choose your religion. Yes, but you choose whether to engage in a same sex marriage , yet you can be demoted at work with a 40% pay cut and even questioned by the police if you make the mildest objection to the practice.

Perhaps the reactions from the Muslim world might make people think again about the effects of blasphemy on believers or perhaps it will merely make them wary of offending just the adherents of one particular belief. Yet Christianity has not been without any success in this field. A sustained and fearless protest led television chiefs to think again about showing *Popetown*.

So, is it right in a largely secular and multi faith society to allow, let alone expect, legislation to be driven by

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Christian principles? Should there be the sort of separation between Church and State which one finds in France and America. Indeed some wonder whether it might not strengthen Christianity if there were such a separation. In the United States, religion is openly canvassed in presidential elections and positions on issues such as abortion can determine political success or failure.

I do not believe for one moment that disestablishment would strengthen Christianity in this country. Strength depends not on law but on culture. Consider Sunday trading. For years England had restrictive laws but Scotland did not. Yet in England the law was widely ignored while in Scotland you could be all but lynched for being seen with a fishing rod on the Sabbath!

It was not law but culture which informed attitudes to Sunday and the culture of Christianity in this country has waned to such an extent that no one who does not himself go to church or otherwise practise the faith can understand its importance to those who do or think it worth taking into account. So disestablishment would not have a magically strengthening effect. On the contrary, all it would guarantee would be the removal of any church influence from public life.

Without an Established Church there could be no possible justification for the compulsory teaching of religion in schools or for the requirement for a daily act of worship, no requirement for any involvement of the Church in the crowning of the monarch.

Society is of course not only secular but multi faith but we need to understand that respecting other faiths should never encompass the surrender of our own. Many of the Jewish, Muslim and other faiths simply can not understand why the Establishment in this country so often seeks to deny the country's Christian nature and heritage: the immense fight launched by Christians to ensure a prayer was included in the official Millennium celebrations, the renaming of Christmas by some councils, the ban on hot cross buns in some schools – the list is endless and as baffling to minority faiths as it is to serious Christians.

So, we need faith in politics and we need serious practitioners of faith there. Serious, faithful and practical. There will not, as I have touched on earlier always be a consensus as to what the Christian line should be either among the politicians themselves or between them and their co –religionists in the country. Let us now look at some applied Christianity.

Can a Christian ever support a war? St Thomas Aquinas set out the tests of a just war and I think sometimes there can be a positive duty to use force. There is moral as well as actual responsibility. Had we not resisted Hitler the six million who died would have been horribly multiplied, courtesy of our inaction. I would have grown up under the Swastika and my Jewish friends would not have grown up at all. We were right to fight and right to kill.

Yet even in war there are limits. Who can imagine Christ blessing planes taking off deliberately to attack civilian targets? The dambusters were one thing. Dresden was

another. Perhaps you feel you can justify Hiroshima but where was the justification for Nagasaki?

War of course creates its obvious dilemmas but matters at home can be challenging too. The aforementioned Archbishop Worlock applied his faith through both immediate and direct relief of poverty and injustice and through political pressure. He was the voice not only of Liverpool but of inner cities everywhere. He prodded the conscience of focussed, aspirational, orderly Britain to take a look at the other Britain.

Let us consider for a moment our two Britains. In the one people set their life on a course in a ship which may be ambitious or may be modest but is not rudderless. From time to time the course changes, the ship is rocked and occasionally wrecked or is criminally plundered but on the whole these sailors through mortal life know which way up their ship is and where the compass can be found.

They have families who rally round in hard times. They have, usually, an occupation, a routine, a reason to live, work, earn. The alarm clock is a feature of their lives, as is the bus ticket and the lunch break. Their children go to school clean and fed.

In the other Britain people live in chaos. Family structures are weak. There is usually no dad at all or there is a procession of men. Sometimes there is a stepdad with whom children do not get on and they are ejected from the family home even younger than the legal age of sixteen. Often there is a collection of siblings

and a variety of different fathers whose principal characteristic is indifference.

From the age that they are old enough to go to school unaccompanied they realise that it is not necessary to go at all. They begin to truant and it is not at all unusual in Her Majesty's prisons to find people who have truanted away the whole of their secondary education.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to large inner city council estates but it is certainly very common in that environment and it is also here that the two Britains exist side by side and by no means always peacefully. Meanwhile every agency shrugs.

Increasingly one Britain is under siege from the other. David Morley was killed, brutally, for the entertainment of a barely literate fourteen year old girl, the daughter of heroin addicts. Tom ap Rhys Price was killed by teenage muggers to whom he had already given all his money. In yet another incident a man was killed by three teenagers to whom he had refused a light.

Good homes can produce bad youngsters and bad homes can produce pillars of society but the norm is that children reflect their upbringing and when society abandons them to instability, ignorance and amorality that same society must later pay the price.

Visible policing, especially in the most troubled areas; enforcement of school attendance; early intervention in dysfunctional families and where necessary the removal of children from the home the environment of which is

corrupting them; the care of physical surroundings: all these would make a good start. However while I am talking about Derek Worlock let us have a look at his mission statement which applies to people of faith in public life as much as to church leaders.

Derek Worlock summed up his mission thus: *to close the gap between religion and life, between what goes on in church and what goes on at work or home; to make our faith a living reality that can be a sign of hope to people in rather troubled times; and at the same time to secure justice and human dignity in the ordinary affairs of life.*

That meant addressing social deprivation but also sectarianism and anything which promoted discord rather than harmony. One wonders what he would have made of Britain today with the growing gap between religion and life, the expansion of the so called underclass and its violence and the new alienation felt by a largely ethnic group which combines religion and politics into a force for hate and indiscriminate destruction.

One wonders what he would have made of the response of politicians with their increasing suppression of free, faith-driven speech?

A person who is driven by faith and who engages in politics must have a vision of the sort of society for which he or she is fighting. My model is taken from the Good Samaritan.

Consider that parable and above all consider the Good Samaritan himself. Who was he? Look at the clues. He

was travelling with what the Authorised Version describes as a beast. We do not know whether it was a camel, a mule or a donkey but he would not have been travelling with a beast at all unless he was fairly well-successful. His beast was the modern equivalent of the motor car and whenever the environmentally pure urge me to swap my car for a pedal cycle, I retort that I could not take the man who fell among thieves to hospital on my pedal cycle.

What is more it was a very well equipped beast. We know that it was well stocked with oil and wine and bandages. This man emerges as possibly a small businessman.

So he stops, puts his wealth at the disposal of the mugging victim and then conveys him to an inn where he pays the innkeeper to look after him. Everyone is happy with the arrangement: the innkeeper gets the custom, the good Samaritan can get on with his business and the man who fell among thieves is looked after in his hour of need.

The question I ask as a politician is simply this: who pays the innkeeper? If nobody had in this parable then the man would not have been looked after. Wealth is necessary to pay the modern innkeepers – the NHS, social services, pensions system, social security, universal education etc etc. , all the institutions which are designed to meet need.

That is why wealth creation has to be at the heart of any compassionate society. You can not exercise compassion

just by feeling it. You must have the means to do so. Penalise the creation of wealth and you abandon the man who fell among thieves, which is to say the most needy.

There is also another, much overlooked lesson in this parable – that of the need for trust. The Good Samaritan had to trust the innkeeper not to inflate his account and charge him for that which he did not provide. The innkeeper had to trust the Samaritan when he promised to return and pay any balance outstanding. Without such reciprocal trust the man in need could not have been cared for.

Yet today trust has all but disappeared from the conduct of both private and public affairs. Wives sell their stories to newspapers . So do mistresses. So do those who claim to have been mistresses. Royal courtiers tell. Employees tell. Children tell. Brothers and sisters tell. Nobody can trust anybody. As with personal relationships so in commerce: try booking a service without having your credit card authorised!

Certainly trust has disappeared between people and politicians. Everyone thinks we tell lies all the time and that is one of the reasons why so many have stopped voting. They think politicians are corrupt, sleazy and in it for themselves. Those who are driven by faith must be driven also by truth.

Our ancestors had a much used word: honour. It is honour which has all but disappeared as a concept to be cherished. A well ordered society should be founded on honour.

The parable of the Good Samaritan also demonstrates an obvious truth but one which poses a large challenge for any practising Christian be he bishop, politician or quiet, unsung citizen. It is that we ourselves have an immediate obligation to relieve need where we find it and not to assume that the State will do it all.

That can be uncomfortable. Take for instance the sort of people to whom I referred when I was talking about two Britains: the purposeless youth already well on the road to a spell in prison or indeed the one who has already been in prison and now adds a criminal record to the other obstacles in the way of a useful, focussed life.

A young person who sees no pattern around him of an orderly, modestly successful life needs to see it. Would you let him see yours? Would you let him mix with your own teenagers? Would you employ him? Would you make him part of your circle or, like the Priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, would you pass by on the other side?

Education should provide the answer but truancy and exclusion, lack of support or interest at home militate against it.

YET TO COME:

The role of the church in delivering political initiatives.

Some tough choices: mother and baby homes versus the state as both roof and breadwinner? Workfare? Work in prison. Secure educational units for the persistently lawless and alienated? Literacy and numeracy versus the panoply of the curriculum for those with serious limitations?

And even tougher challenges: Getting aspiration into failing schools and neighbourhoods. Fighting the drugs culture. Fighting the dependency culture. Reinventing neighbourliness and the extended family.