

Can love be a political force?

In a famous speech delivered in Memphis the night before his assassination in April 1968, Martin Luther King used Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan to describe his own struggle as principally one of justice, the outworking of which he calls "dangerous unselfishness." The Good Samaritan story, of course, is about neighbourliness and difference which plays out in the lives of characters associated with the respectable religious establishment – the priest and the Levite – and a foreign outcast, the Samaritan. Within their own normative structures, it's quite possible to argue that both priest and levite acted fairly, as their own tribe would expect. But it is the Samaritan who shows us what justice looks like. As well as offering immediate help, the Samaritan also commits to long term care, escorts the beaten man to an inn, underwrites the cost of ongoing treatment, and ensures that this nameless stranger is restored to full health. This whole package is, if you like, an act of love, offered from one person to another, and celebrated in the annals of history. Martin Luther King recounts from his own experience of driving it that the Jericho Road is a particularly treacherous one: there were all sorts of reasons why otherwise good people might not have wanted to stop! But the fundamental difference between the Samaritan and the others, is that instead of asking the question of what might happen to him if he stops, at forefront of his mind is what would transpire for the *beaten* man if he did not stop. The Samaritan engages, acts justly and kindly towards the man, and reveals that the circles of neighbours and outcasts – friends and enemies – overlap. In King's speech, he ponders whether priest and levite might have been on their way to a meeting of the "Jericho Road Improvement Association". "Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect." We've all known plenty of such committees, their good intentions, and occasional good results! But the point is, justice compelled the Samaritan to stop, and through so doing, he could act lovingly. In all the wide and varied theological, juridical, sociological and philosophical commentary on this most well-known parable over the last two thousand years, at its heart is a person-centred vision of justice which can be owned and operated by a community. The parable has been used by secular commentators, in the story of the Muslim Ali Abu Awaad, and by modern Jewish thinkers. This tale full of "inverted expectations" saves us "from the way of blood", in the words of one of our leading interfaith theologians.¹

¹ James Walters *Loving your neighbour in an age of religious conflict* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019, pp. 17ff

Why do I begin with justice in a lecture which is primarily about love? Because, I suggest, in societal and political terms, we still have a lot to learn about what love *is*, and about how its dynamics might shape our politics. It is relatively straightforward to extrapolate a communal, or even political theology of love from this person-based vision, and that is certainly one I would celebrate and recommend. The realm of political speech cannot rest or remain in the abstract, and, not least in a period when we are being encouraged again both nationally and globally to consider issues of subsidiarity, that political speech should seek to impact on and operate in real, enfolded human communities and relationships. There is no doubt that the practical outworking of what we call love, operates through virtues including justice. I hope that Bishop Warburton himself might approve of this initial conclusion, given that the revised Trust Deed exhorts the lecturer to consider ‘the relationship between the concepts and practice of law and the principles and practice of religion.’ If our politics is going to be shaped by love – if love really can be a political force – it will need to pay close attention to justice, and those other ‘allied’ virtues, which allows love to exercise its muscles in the public square.

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged onto the international stage at a moment already beset by dizzying social, environmental, and political fragmentation. The late Lord Sacks well described this movement of so many of our tectonic plates as ‘cultural climate change’, which was already having a transformative effect on individual day to day life and the geopolitical arena. The plates are shifting, and there are so many of them, it’s sometimes quite hard to keep up. “The nations of the world are at war in the midst of peace”, argued Professor Jurgen Moltmann of Tubingen in last year’s Charles Gore Lecture in Westminster Abbey, reflecting on the problems of neo-nationalism and cyber wars. This thick, and deeply layered context for the emergence of a pandemic, has brought us into genuinely new waters. When the Chinese politician Zhou Enlai was asked for his assessment of the consequences of the French Revolution on its 200th anniversary, he famously replied that it was far too soon to tell. We don’t quite know how this virus will re-shape the world, but we do know that our resources for dealing with it are not quite the same as in previous ages, and that it has affected all sorts of things we take for granted. The danger of mass infection affects not just travel but touch, not just the health of our economy but our mental health, not just the essential provision of food, but the sustaining potential of the arts and culture to enlarge our vision.

And yet, despite some of the sloppy language used by our politicians, society has not been closed during this period – rather, we have seen the sinews at the heart of our society working at full tilt. We have seen in our lives and on our screens what is so often hidden - key workers in healthcare,

food provision and so many other areas, committing to public health and public life before their own. When we recall that each of these essential services is actually made up of scores of thousands of individual efforts and commitments, we see the impact that personal agency really has on the whole. This is especially moving when one pauses to note that such assistance has frequently come to our country from those who are themselves tired, vulnerable, scapegoated, under-rewarded.² At that personal level of commitment and public service, love certainly can be a political and social force.

However, we still need a route through from personhood to the more explicitly political. There is a dense overlap of agency between individuals, their sense of vocation or career, the intermediate institutions which often nurture and deliver ‘results’, and the big-picture political decisions and narratives. The map is easier to draw, the data easier to interpret, and the affectionate bonds easier both to structure and recognise, at a local level. There is of course a vast amount of literature in philosophy, secular and sacred, as well as in sociology and theology which digs into these questions. The pandemic has placed the individual, and her or his relationship to the wider whole, in a place where more immediate, public interrogation is possible. It has also prompted us to spend quite a lot of time speculating on the role of the state, its responsibilities, and the limits of its power. Perhaps one thing the Christian tradition teaches us, is where and where *not* to look for final answers. The state and its politics cannot be anything like a final answer to metaphysical or even moral questions. We should not expect our societies to naturally evolve into a more obvious or intense loving structures. Human sin, selfishness, violence and greed, all make utopian narratives rather unrealistic. Love will not be *corralled* in the service of other dynamics; it cannot be made to serve other ends. For that reason, some Christian thinkers have been nervous about attributing love to the political realm at all.

However, the dichotomy is, that public life – and therefore the political arena – is, for most of us, is one of the arenas in which we are called to become what we shall be. Politics – the structuring of the body, the community, the nation – has within it a reaching beyond itself. It has an intrinsic desire to make sense of more than itself, and to create more than the sum of its parts. In that sense, genuine politics is in some way about transcendence. The other option, in Christian terms, is a chilling one: self-referential, unreflective idolatry, is the end of politics when it resists transcendence. For love to be a political force, politics itself, and political systems, must be open

² I expand on this in my lecture *What is hope?* for Westminster Abbey Institute. The video can be watched: <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/institute/past-institute-lectures/hope>

to other shapings – justice, mercy, solidarity – which encourage the transcendent character and potential of political life to be honed. Then, our politics might reveal relationships which animate a nation, a town, a community.

For politics to be truly wise, it must have a reflective reflex; and that means it must have a sense of its own history, its failings as well as its successes. As we emerge from the pandemic, the most fatal next move would be not to learn from it. In today's first reading from the book of Joshua, the priests have carried the Ark of the Covenant through the waters of the Jordan. This becomes seen as a ritual enactment of the Exodus, the journey of Israel out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea, towards the promised land. Later Christian typology has seen within this 'crossing over' a reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Joshua poses the question, "When your children ask in time to come, "What do those stones mean to you?" you shall say to them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord." We need to look back, to see where things worked and how they worked, and where and how they didn't work, without a sense that we will ever precisely replicate that which has gone before. What do these stones mean? As politics which celebrates the possibility of love as a political dynamic, is interested in truth, but less in scalps; it is interested in development, but less in ideology. It is open to the transcendent, and is not nervous of public signs of hope, or public signs of lament.

Pope Francis has written a beautiful encyclical entitled *Fratelli Tutti*. It is a meditation on human solidarity and interconnectedness; it is a companion piece to his document on the environment, *Laudato Si'*. This is, of course, a document addressed to a global audience, and not to any particular national scene. But some of his interrogation of our international life bears repeating at a national level. In his fourth chapter, the Pope reflects, "if the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters is not to remain an abstract idea... then numerous related issues emerge, forcing us to see things in a new light and to develop new responses."³ His following sections are entitled *Borders and their limits*, and *Reciprocal Gifts*. In the section on borders, the Pope grounds his writing in the insight that societies need to be dynamic rather than static in integrating difference. Difference should be promoted, not simply on its own grounds, but in the interest of 'human fraternity.' When discussing the migration crisis – the largest mass movement of people since the end of the Second World War – Pope Francis uses the words, 'welcome, protect, promote, integrate.' A politics of love is expansive, but it also builds up, enriches and sustains. It seeks to integrate, but not to flatten out.

³ I focus here on Chapter Five of the encyclical.

The exchange of gifts is a common theme both in theology and contemporary political philosophy. It's quite straightforward. But following the thinking of the Yale Professor Miroslav Volf, I want to suggest that a politics of love worthy of the name is not entirely *dependent* upon reciprocity. God's gifts do not demand an exchange, because God could never *be* re-paid. There is something in the US-sense of 'paying it forward' – gratitude for gifts given, especially those which are freely offered, might take root in future actions or habits of life. If the driving forces of our politics are rooted in grace and committed to the common good, a person-centred vision, which flourishes in communities of generosity and creativity, love will be the internal dynamic of such a series of relationships. That, after all, is what politics is – the way in which we relate to one another in the life of a locality, a State, a region, an international community.

One of the images used by Jesus for himself and for his new community – the Church – is that of the Vine. You may know the wonderful mosaic of that image in the Church of San Clemente in Rome, where the tendrils spill out from the Cross at the heart of the Vine. All life is contained here, and the vine leaves support a variety of images of medieval people pursuing their work. Yes, there are friars at services, and monks in the scriptorium – but there are also images of a woman feeding her ducks, a farmer tilling the fields, all held together by the one life within the vine. We began with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story which turns a quotidian event – the discovery of someone in need – into an ethic. We've wrestled this morning with how we move from individual personal action to a more corporate sense of how love might shape politics. We should not forget the small actions which reap great harvests – the person on the tank in Tiannamen Square, the single nun begging soldiers in Myanmar not to shoot, the aid worker stepping into a situation of great danger simply to protect one person's rights. In *fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis writes, "No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort meaningless, no painful endurance wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force.... For this reason, it is truly noble to place our hope in the hidden power of the seeds of goodness we sow, and thus to initiate processes whose fruits will be reaped by others. Good politics combines love with hope and with confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts."⁴

For the Christian, to *abide* in Christ, and to become branches of the vine, is a political act. It animates all relationships, and roots them in the one whom we believe to be mercy, truth, justice and love. Towards the end of Chapter Five, Pope Francis insists that "*authentic* political life, built

⁴ *Fratelli tutti* V: 196

upon respect for law and frank dialogue between individuals, is constantly renewed whenever there is a realisation that every woman and man, and every new generation, brings the promise of new relational, intellectual, cultural and spiritual energies.” Love can certainly be a political force through the actions and commitments of individuals and communities which make up the *polis*. The urgent question which should detain anyone entering public life, is how we can better ensure that our *politics* might be a force for love.

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June 2021