



Christianity and The Future of Politics

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John Summers

Genesis 11: 1-9 Philippians 3: 4b-12

It's a sad indictment of our times that in this age of grave national and international crisis, much of our political discourse has concerned suitcases full of booze and a grubby pornography scandal. Even if you've had your head turned by a Dominator Combine Harvester toiling seductively away in the fields, it's not hard to imagine that there might be some better calls on our political energies.

Politics – broadly understood as all aspects of the business of government and of the state – is in crisis. And its crisis is in large part a crisis of communication. Political discourse – the way politicians talk with each other and the way we talk about politics – has become dysfunctional. It is not fit for purpose because it is uncondusive to solving the major problems of our age. Even worse, the way in which it is conducted now is positively obstructive of the advancement of any useful or virtuous programme.

There are various strands to this problem. Too often political discourse now involves talking at, not with, other people. Traditionally this was a problem reserved for especially hot issues where angry demonstrators might confront each other and hurl slogans and insults with no particular interest in the answer. But now it is the routine mode of dialogue on Twitter and other platforms when dealing with comparatively routine issues, the necessary consequence of a political culture which prioritises editable snippets of speech fit for the evening news, in which there is no space (and no wish) for dialogue. A related issue is the phenomenon of political discourse which involves people talking past, and not with, each other. Serious issues are approached from different angles – not in itself a problem, of course – but the ensuing discussion becomes entrenched in positions which cannot speak to each other because the fundamental concerns at play are so categorically different. Finally, too often political discourse breaks down to the point where people do not talk to each other at all. Certain points of view become so taboo in the political mind that those who profess them are deemed not to be worthy of being spoken to at all, whether through disengagement, blocking or cancellation. Two different consequences are easily foreseeable. First, the suppression of progressive but minority points of view: plenty of modern progressive commonplaces were once unsayable in polite company. Second, the romanticization of patently problematic attitudes which need worry less about the lack of logic at their core when they can rely on the glamorisation of having effectively been banned.

But don't settle too comfortably, whilst listening to this critique, into a mental picture of your least favourite politician, pinning the blame on them: for while politics is most acutely manifested in the seats of national and local government, and in the chambers of international diplomacy, it is inseparably attached to the lives, habits and attitudes of us all. For here is an uncomfortable truth – we are not simply responsible for politicians because we elect them. We are also responsible because we set the cultural tone out of which our political candidates, representatives and culture emerge.

Why does the way that we speak to each other matter – not just in politics but in life more generally? It matters because language is the tool that we have to seek after knowledge, understanding and truth. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that words are two dimensional labels for things we can say we completely understand. In fact words, strung together in a sentence but, crucially, brought to life by being situated in a context of behaviour, pauses, tones, games and experiment, don't entrap truth but rather seek after it. Rowan Williams uses a wonderful image of words being like water that bobs along in the wake of truth, never able to encapsulate it entirely but, to switch metaphors, taking us towards it as a sculptor works away at a block of marble, each chip of the chisel crafting a little more the sense of what lies inside. Words left on their own, unanswered and devoid of context, shrivel and die. They become meaningless and inert. They cease to be tools of exploration and become at best withered memorials to a spirit of enquiry which has, by definition, died.

Because of this, there can never be a 'last word' about anything that matters. The end of speech is the beginning of disaster: of intellectual and ethical nothingness, stasis and drift. It is no coincidence that in the story of the Tower of Babel, God's curse upon mankind involves visiting upon the proud peoples of the earth an inability to talk to each other. The hubristic city which builds the tower speaks one language, but in its destruction is scattered about the world speaking many mutually unintelligible tongues. (The story of Pentecost, coming soon to all good chapels, is the undoing of this curse through the gift of the spirit which enables those of different lands to speak together again: note how with the spirit of truth comes interactive discourse.) Similarly, the psalmist's question in tonight's anthem, How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?, is a question which shows how keeping discourse alive is key to sustaining the spirit of a people and a thinking, interactive relationship with God. Note how he says that if he forgets God he deserves to have his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth: wordlessness is torture.

Now if Christianity can sympathise with the problem, can it say anything about the solution? It is sometimes said that we live in a new age of puritanism. Arguably one of puritanism's worst characteristics is a desire to escape the intolerable pressure of unnatural self-discipline by diverting attention away from the unworthiness of the self by denouncing the unworthiness of our fellow human beings. A related character flaw is self-righteousness: a blind confidence in the worthiness of one's own opinions leading to the conclusion that nothing anybody else says can be worth listening to unless it completely confirms one's own opinion. We shout at each other because we don't care about the answer, we talk past each other if we don't want to see another person's point of view and we stop speaking to people entirely when the possibility of another point of view existing becomes intolerable.

If righteousness is the problem then grace is the answer. To be receptive to grace is to open oneself up to the core plank of Christian doctrine, that our ultimate human fulfilment is not something we can secure for ourselves but for which we depend on divine benevolence – the gifts of love and forgiveness – and the acceptance that these gifts are unearned. Situating ourselves as recipients of grace and not the purveyors of it reminds us to deal with our fellow human beings in a way which sets the failings we perceive in them as being

of a piece with our own. If we can embrace that perspective then the barriers to good speech should start to fall away: we should be desperate to hear a challenge to our point of view, because we become mindful of the limitations of our own powers. We should long to situate ourselves in the world view of another person, because that person is as deserving of fulfilment and love as we are. We should feel compelled to engage with those with whom we disagree because part of the grace given to us is the grace to seek truth through discourse.

Politics will emerge from this crisis when we begin to have the confidence to talk to each other in humility and in a generous spirit of seeking after understanding. St Paul was the great wordsmith of his age, yet in his letter to the Philippians he recounts all his personal achievements and dismisses them as but dung compared to the grace he has received from God (in fact, he used a Greek word which is far ruder than dung – one which I dare not repeat in front of our innocent and impressionable choir). The orator and scholar of his age, the man of words and letters, Paul dismisses his achievements as nothing compared to the rewards of being a conduit for grace.

This is not a manifesto for behaving like a weathervane in political debate. I do not suggest that every opinion is as good as any other. But I do suggest that failing to talk to each other is a poison in our political bloodstream which will eventually end us all. The way out, as ever, is paved with grace.